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ADRIA, THE ADOPTED; OR, THE MYSTERY OF ELLESFORD GRANGE.

BY MRS. JENNIE DAVIS BURTON,

AUTHOR OF "CECIL'S DECEIT," ETC., ETC.



VALERIA POUNCED DOWN UPON NELLY KENT WITH CAT-LIKE AGILITY. "WHAT HAVE YOU STOLEN?" SHE DEMANDED.

Adria, the Adopted;

OR,

The Mystery of Ellesford Grange.

AN AMERICAN ROMANCE.

BY MRS. JENNIE DAVIS BURTON,

AUTHOR OF "THE FALSE WIDOW," "STRANGELY WED," "DOUBLY DIVORCED," "THE TERRIBLE TRUTH," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE shadow of a great crime brooded low over Ellesford Grange. People came and went in little knots, with scarred faces and shuddering horror, and talked in awe-stricken whispers of the terrible deed done in darkness, which had left a shocking spectacle to be revealed by day.

Hugh Ellesford had been found murdered.

There were all the signs of a violent struggle, to give evidence that he had not died tamely. A curtain torn to shreds, furniture overturned—even the carpet ripped from its fastenings in a place or two; pools of blood lying stagnant on the floor, and sanguine marks smearing the wall.

The corpse was terribly mutilated. Bruised from head to foot, clawed and bitten, as if by a wild animal, but with five livid marks upon the throat, made, unmistakably by human fingers.

A tiny lace handkerchief, rumpled and crushed, with an elaborately embroidered monogram, lay upon a sofa in the room.

A coroner's inquest decided upon the apparent facts. The place was carefully guarded, that no single article might be touched until shrewd detectives were sent for and had arrived. These took minute notes, looked stolid, and said nothing. Only one thing other than the shocking result was made known to the excited populace. The party making the attack must have suffered severely.

The marks upon the walls were of some one groping his way through darkness; dull red stains marked the length of the passageway, and on the steps the profusion of blood seemed to show that the assassin, probably overcome by faintness, had paused there for a time.

Beyond this, no single trace was visible. The graveled walk, indeed, precluded the possibility of footprints, and for all evidence existing further, the earth might have opened before the portal, inclosing the guilty mortal stepping therefrom.

The housekeeper, sleeping in an adjoining wing, had heard nothing; but this was not remarkable, considering the dead, thick walls which intervened. This woman, the only living soul attached to the place, was of advanced age, and a foreigner.

The tragedy seemed to have benumbed her faculties, but she managed to give a tolerably succinct account of preceding circumstances, which threw no ray of light upon the mystery. Her dazed manner, and the haunting terror that made her start and shiver at the most trivial sound, attracted the observation of a few. There were some insidious whispers tending to inculpate her, but the manifest impossibility of such a fact soon stilled them.

There was a silent ebbing and flowing of the common tide of humanity which could not have crossed the threshold of the Grange at any other time—country people, whose curiosity led them there, while their superstitious imaginings peopled the dark old rooms with ghostly witnesses of that sanguinary scene.

There was the funeral conducted with the gloomy state becoming the position of the murdered man, and the excitement attending the event gradually wore away as time elapsed, and no further facts developed.

Hugh Ellesford had lived a very secluded life. Though not tending toward misanthropy, he had kept himself resolutely from the surrounding world. He had been a rather wild youth, running into numerous excesses, but these received an early check.

Rumor said that a fair young girl, to whom he had been betrothed, had jilted him for a steadier rival, changing thus the gay lad to a grave, disappointed man. As evidence, the gossips pointed to his precipitate departure for distant lands, from whence he returned, after a three years' sojourn, reserved, lonely, and with a somewhat eccentric.

The Grange was a great, gloomy building, ancient in style, with massive granite walls. Its founder was an English gentleman of small title, and estate so incumbered that no single

generation could hope to relieve it: he had, therefore, prudently resigned all to his next of kin, and sailed for the New World, there to build up an independent inheritance. But he had brought with him many old English customs and prejudices. In accordance with these, he had bequeathed his entire estate to his eldest son, who, in turn, disposed of it in the same manner, this third heir being the late Hugh Ellesford.

Death had come to him so unexpectedly, and so suddenly, that, had he so desired, he was given no opportunity to signify his disposition of the property. In the absence of a will, it naturally reverted to his only near relative—a younger brother.

This brother, Joseph Ellesford, beginning life with a small annual moiety, had found it necessary to strike for his niche in the world, since Fate, in denying him precedence of birth, had not already carved it for him.

He began at the lower round of the ladder, as junior clerk in a small mercantile establishment, and, though possessing no great taste for the work, devoted himself steadily to it, and rose, at a snail's pace, until he occupied a responsible position among the firm's employees. A lucky accident, which revealed to him a plot between some of the light-fingered gentry to relieve the store of certain valuable goods, and their generous intentions being frustrated by his prompt interference, called forth the gratitude of his employers, and was the means of admitting him on a social footing into their family circles.

By this time he had passed his third decade, and had come to be regarded as an incorrigible bachelor. Now, however, a new epoch opened in his life. Mr. Stratton, the senior partner, had one child, a daughter, who had been for three years a widow. Young and fair, her charms soon found the "open sesame" to Mr. Ellesford's heart. Her little girl, then five years of age, shared his affections equally with the mother; and a few months more saw him fairly enlisted in the great army of Benedicts. He passed a few years of happy married life, and then his wife's decease left him to center all the love of his heart upon the little Adria.

With his marriage, he was received into the firm of Stratton & Co., himself, with two small capitalists, constituting the Co. Where so many shared the profits of a limited business, it is not to be supposed that Joseph Ellesford made very rapid strides to wealth. Still the establishment prospered, and, ten years later, being the time this story opens, he enjoyed a comfortable income.

Possessing none of his ancestors' prejudices, he always had felt the will which richly endowed the elder son and left himself comparatively destitute, to have been unjust. The result was a slight coolness between the two brothers, and, during the twenty years of their separated life, only a nominal intercourse had been sustained. Now, that the estate had unexpectedly reverted to him, Joseph Ellesford was inclined to regard the circumstance as a Providential dispensation, thus recompensing him for the forced loss of a natural right.

After an interval, during which time the excitement incident to the murder had in some wise subsided, he removed to Ellesford Grange. One of the new possessor's whims was to personally direct some alterations he wished made upon the mansion. To this end, as soon as he was actually settled, he procured workmen, and rapidly prosecuted the task of modernizing the building.

This had been expected of him by the country people. The Grange had been a gloomy place at best, and after the horrible tragedy enacted there, the dark rooms must have presented a trebly uninviting aspect. But the work brought to light a fact rendering the preceding mystery even more inexplicable.

A wide, pleasant room, artfully contrived in an angle connecting the main building with one wing, and not noticeable to merely superficial inspection, was thus discovered.

It was lighted only by a sky-light set in the arched ceiling. The walls were hung with heavy embossed paper, the floor covered with rich Turkey carpet. The apartment, evidently, was furnished with reference to an Oriental taste, and the gorgeous hues embraced in its appointments were blended in perfect harmony. A luxurious divan and ottomans of velvet supplied the want of chairs; a few hanging shelves contained a small but choice library. A dainty bul-bul stand upheld a complete array of toilet accessories. A guitar, handsomely finished, rested uncased in a corner. A side-table of stained solid wood, with pendent sides carved in a variety of grotesque figures, was littered with the contents of a lady's work-box. An embra-

sure, separated from the room by silken curtains, contained a couch and a cedar wardrobe, the partially unclosed doors of the latter disclosing a few rich, bright robes. Every minute detail displayed the trace of a female occupant.

The detectives previously employed were recalled, and put in possession of this discovery. An additional sum was named with the already large reward for the apprehension of the unknown assassin, and the machinery of the secret force revolved with accelerated motion beneath the new impetus.

The old housekeeper, who had removed to a hut in the vicinity, was subjected to another minute examination, but the bewilderment she had displayed in the first instance seemed to have resulted in simple idiocy. Bribes, persuasions and threats failed to elicit information from her, and at last her questioners were satisfied that she either could not or would not give any clew to the mystery.

"You see—she is hopelessly foolish," said Mr. Ellesford, at the conclusion of one of these fruitless visits to her cabin.

The officer accompanying him thought he detected a momentary gleam of cunning intelligence in the old woman's eyes, but subsequent tests failed to elicit any thing further, if, indeed, even so much was not a delusion.

By and by, the search lost interest, but was still prosecuted in a desultory sort of way. And so five years wore away, without more noticeable incident than the endless variety of current events to mark the passing time.

CHAPTER II.

ADRIA ELLESFORD (her father's name had been Westland but she was known now only by her step-father's name,) was rapidly nearing her twentieth year. Life seemed very pleasant to her, for as yet she knew nothing of the vicissitudes of fortune which make strong men quail, and weaker women fade and droop before them.

Joseph Ellesford's union had been blessed with no issue, and from the first Adria was dear to him as though truly his own child. Indulged, but not spoiled, naturally imperious, though thoughtful of the welfare of others, she was accustomed to having her wishes consulted in matters both of trivial import and greater consideration.

The bright morning of a long summer day tempted her out early. The Ellesford grounds lay on a gentle slope, and the Grange was hemmed in by clumps of dark old trees, the remains of the forest occupying the domain when the founder of the house pitched upon this as his abiding place.

It was a beautiful stretch of country in sunny Maryland, and far away the blue Chesapeake glittered, as the breeze ruffling the waves broke the reflected sun-rays into atoms of sparkling light.

Adria had been enticed beyond the limit she usually prescribed for her walks, but turned at last homeward again. Her eyes were beaming and cheeks flushed with the exercise. She was singing softly to herself, and thinking as young ladies are apt to do, of nothing. Her scarf, a filmy white thing, was draped loosely about her shoulders, and a puff of air snatching it unexpectedly carried it high above her reach, where its fringed ends caught in the branches of a tree by the roadside.

It was an inauspicious moment for *Æolus* to consummate this playful act.

A horseman galloped at a furious pace up the sandy road. The great black steed reared and plunged wildly as the snowy fabric fluttered on the breeze before him. Of course Adria screamed. It is not in woman's nature to be calm in the face of sudden danger.

A firm hand held the rein, and the heavily-loaded, silver-mounted whip cut relentlessly upon the animal's flank. Twice the rider forced his horse toward the object of his fright unsuccessfully, but the third time the stinging lash and spurs driven cruelly in his flesh brought him trembling beneath the tree.

The gentleman coolly disentangled the scarf from the branches and dismounting returned it with courteous address. The conflict between man and beast recalled Adria's nerve. Her emotions were divided between admiration for the indomitable will which had conquered, and sympathy for the intelligent brute cowed into perfect submission.

"Poor fellow! I am sorry that I should have indirectly caused his fright, and brought upon him such a chastisement," she said.

"The Sultan will like me all the better for it," his master replied, patting him. "He is a little inclined to be vicious sometimes and needs

discipline. For my part I can regret no circumstance brought about through the medium of such a charming cause," he added, gallantly.

Adria did not quite like the neatly-turned compliment.

"Colonel Templeton is pleased to rank flattery among his accomplishments," she said.

He looked slightly surprised.

"You know me, then. May I inquire—"

"I am Miss Ellesford," Adria hastened to explain, fearing the repetition of an eulogistic speech.

"Then we are quite near neighbors. I have taken re-possession at The Firs, as you may know."

Adria knew, and said something appropriate. Colonel Templeton, throwing the rein over his arm, proceeded to walk by her side. He was a skillful conversationist and just now anxious to please. He seldom failed in accomplishing any object, and Adria was not long in recognizing and appreciating his ability.

He was a spare, tall man, with features that in repose were as immovable as though cast in a mold of steel, but, played upon by varying expressions as he talked, became pleasing, even winning. His lips were thin, eyes cold gray, over-arched by accurately penciled brows, and dark hair cut close, just touched by silver sparkles. Forty, he must be, Adria thought, after carefully studying his appearance. In reality he was past fifty, but the iron will which had made him old at twenty successfully resisted the encroachments of Time at a half-century.

When they reached the gate leading into the Ellesford grounds, a friendly footing was established between them.

"I would ask you in to luncheon," she said, laughingly, as she paused an instant, "but perhaps you do not emulate the regular hours we keep at the Grange."

"Half-past eleven," he commented, consulting his watch, "and I have not yet breakfasted. Mrs. Templeton will be waiting. You must call upon my wife, Miss Ellesford."

"I shall be most pleased," Adria answered.

Colonel Templeton mounting rode slowly up the yellow way, with brows bent meditatively and vision which might have been sightless as the stone eyeballs of Destiny, for all he absorbed of surrounding objects.

"By Jove, sir! you are over-choice of your footing I think!" a familiar voice broke his reverie.

The Sultan, left to himself, had quit the high road and was stepping daintily over the gravelled footpath. The colonel wheeled him into the thoroughfare again, and turned his face toward the speaker. A young man whose easy manner hinted almost of insolence, and dressed in the height of the prevailing style. The strong resemblance existing bespoke their relative position as father and son.

"Where are you going, Reginald?"

"Where, indeed, but to the races."

"Very well! Don't bet too heavily."

"Trust me for that, sir."

They parted, pursuing opposite directions.

Colonel Templeton left his horse at the stables, and went into the breakfast-room where his wife awaited him.

A small, slight woman with pale hair, and a face from which some horror seemed to have blanching every vestige of color, leaving instead a haunting shade that sought in vain a hiding-place, but trembled always in her eyes and betrayed itself in a painfully-nervous manner.

She greeted her husband with a pitiful attempt at a smile, and shuddered slightly as he just touched her forehead with his lips. He observed the involuntary action, and his mouth settled stern and hard, but he controlled his voice to cool courtesy:

"Have you breakfasted yet, Irene?"

"Yes, with Reginald. I was not assured you would come."

"Ah, well, it is of no consequence. Pray remain. I wish to consult with you on a matter of importance." The last spoken sneeringly, but Mrs. Templeton was accustomed to her husband's depreciation of woman's abilities and passed it silently.

She rung for the service, and while her husband discussed his meal in moody silence, leaned back in her chair listlessly awaiting his pleasure.

"I have seen Ellesford's daughter," he said, abruptly, putting down his cup.

His wife started perceptibly.

"She will call upon you in a day or two, and I desire that you cultivate an intimacy with the family."

"With the Ellesfords?" she said, huskily.

"With the Ellesfords! More than that, I

wish you to manage that Reginald shall meet the young lady. The disobedient young dog would avoid such encounter if he imagined it was desired of him. Let him see the girl once, and he will be ready enough to seek her afterward."

Mrs. Templeton gazed at her husband imploringly. She knew him too well to attempt to hasten his disclosure, but this morning he was graciously communicative. Perhaps he knew that his words were inflicting heart-stabs.

"I will be candid with you. I am anxious that Reginald shall settle in life. He is a little wild, and nothing will settle him so soon as taking a wife. Miss Ellesford will please me well as my daughter-in-law."

Mrs. Templeton uttered a stifled groan; and all the latent horror leaped intensified into her eyes. She crossed the room with uneven steps and laid her trembling hand on her husband's shoulder.

"For Heaven's sake, Alan, tell me that you do not mean it! You can not contemplate such a sin—you will never permit our boy to marry an Ellesford!"

"Why not?" he asked, coldly. "Ellesford Grange is a desirable property!"

His wife sunk into a chair, clasping her hands in bitter, hopeless agony. Her silent pain touched him, and he added more kindly:

"After all the girl is not really an Ellesford—no drop of the blood in her veins. Only a step-daughter, I have heard, but she will inherit the property. Remember, I shall expect your co-operation."

He turned away dismissing the subject. Mrs. Templeton, with her white face almost ghastly, put out her hands in the manner of a blind person, groping her way silently from the room.

Later in the day her French maid announced that madame was suffering from a nervous relapse, and had not monsieur better procure a physician?

Monsieur thought it unnecessary, but with his own hands mixed a composing draught with the soothing qualities of which he was well acquainted.

CHAPTER III.

THE sun rode proudly over the hills closing in one of the many manufacturing towns situated in an Eastern State. The houses were ranged in methodical rows, displaying the systematic and uncompromising sort of order indulged in by our New England fathers.

A town where the wooden streets formed no angles but right angles, where the buildings conveyed an endless repetition of white framework and green blinds, with here and there a huge gray factory rising two stories above the common dwellings.

The very river running its course on the east side of the place detracted nothing from its regularity, and droned its murmur in an unvarying monotone as it rolled placidly within its narrow banks. In a place or two some enterprising spirits had endeavored to mitigate the too great uniformity by dropping a neutral-tinted cottage in a nook of its own apart from the regular street, but these were so stared at by the glaring white and green of the surrounding walls that they quite lost countenance beneath the general disapprobation.

And this was Crofton.

In the center of the town, rearing itself yet a story higher than any of its compeers and employing a full score more of workers, stood the factory of the Russell Brothers.

The long, narrow windows were let down from the top, and the half-screens adjusted to prevent careless eyes wandering from the duty before them. From top to bottom the whirr, and buzz, and steady clank of machinery announced that every worker was in place, and every joint of the mechanical anatomy performing its office.

A slight bustle at the entrance-way, which would not have been heard by unpracticed ears, and word was passed from mouth to mouth that the proprietors were coming to inspect the works.

Two elderly men, very fac-similes of each other from their lank bodies and straggling limbs, to their long, sharp features, and twinkling, deep-set eyes drawn down at the corners with the expressions accepted as denominating genuine Yankee humor, but with them settled irretrievably into the accompanying attribute, shrewdness. Down the long room where rows of women swiftly and steadily plied at the looms, taking in every detail, and listening silently to the remarks of the foreman as he noted different points in passing.

A middle-aged, respectable looking woman,

leaving her position by a distant window, crossed the room on some temporary mission, and was returning when she met face to face with the party. She stepped aside, silently waiting for them to pass.

A great wheel revolved close by, but she was not heeding. Her eyes were fixed with startled intent scrutiny on the face of the young foreman. A second more, her dress had caught within the band and she was whirled aloft, giving utterance to a single agonized shriek, which was echoed by every woman there.

An instant, which seemed an eternity, a wild confusion with people rushing hither and thither, crying for help, themselves incapable of action, and then the works stood still. The unfortunate woman was upheld in kindly arms, and pitying, horror-struck faces crowded around. These were imperatively ordered back and a messenger dispatched for the nearest physician.

The woman was severely injured and the workers said among themselves that it was only short of a miracle she had escaped with her life. It proved that her left arm was utterly crushed; there were bruises too upon her body, but these were not serious.

"Who is she?" one of the proprietors asked.

A tidy, comely-looking girl stepped forward.

"If you please, she's a new hand and comes from the Brankley mills. They say she's a little touched here," indicating her forehead, "but a quiet sort of body and steady. She has a room in Hay's house."

Orders were given for her removal thither, and twenty minutes later the machinery was again in motion and business proceeding quietly as though no accident had ever invaded the place.

But one person had been deeply affected by the occurrence. The young foreman had caught the woman's strange gaze fixed upon him in the same moment she was whirled upward by the wheel, and it was his prompt action that had delivered her alive. Her ghastly face as he saw it for an instant was imprinted on his memory, and haunted him throughout that day. When the factory closed for the night he went directly to Hay's house to inquire more minutely into her state.

Hay's wife, a good intentioned person, but scarcely calculated for a skillful nurse, conducted him to the patient's room.

She was suffering acute pain and was slightly delirious. Looking upon her, he observed that her features, though flushed and distorted, were delicate, and the uninjured hand lying upon the counterpane was slender and well-shaped though rough with common toil. Evidently her sphere had some time been high above the life of drudgery she had so lately led. But she could never do so again. The doctor had announced that could she escape the amputation of the wounded member it would probably remain paralyzed. He sighed as he turned away, thinking that death might have been the preferable alternative.

He gave a coin of some value to the woman attending her and enjoined utmost care in her treatment. After this he visited her daily, seeing that she wanted for nothing. It was weeks before she was thoroughly convalescent, and meantime events were transpiring which threatened to remove her only friend and benefactor.

The Russell Brothers found themselves in urgent need of a trusty agent to communicate directly with firms throughout the country to whom they furnished goods. Their distant interests were failing for want of personal attendance, and some tedious accounts required an energetic person to push for final settlement. Casting about them they settled upon Kenneth Hastings, their foreman.

His place could be readily supplied from experienced men in their employ. The proposition was made and a liberal commission assigned him should he accept it. He embraced the offer gladly. The position he occupied was not one he would have voluntarily sought; but from boyhood he had found employment in the factory, and had gradually risen to the highest post. This pretext would afford him relaxation and an opportunity he had never yet possessed of seeing the world. Utterly alone he had no tie that could bind him to Crofton.

He had but a single regret. The invalid with the Hay people had grown to watch for his coming and took a degree of comfort in his simple presence which nothing else afforded. She was called Nellie Kent, and the townspeople considered her crazed though harmless; but there were times when Hastings considered this a harmless imposition practiced to secure her from the coarse curiosity of those about her. He had found her intelligent and refined, and a warm sympathy for her lonely condition di-

rected his friendship toward her. She possessed a small amount of money, enough to secure her from present want, but he knew his departure would leave a void in her daily life.

His preparations were necessarily hurried, and he did not find time to visit her until the evening previous to his departure.

She was sitting by the open window with the far-off look in her eyes which was commonly regarded as the vacant look of insanity. She welcomed him quietly, and he attempted to find some indirect means of imparting his news, but she anticipated him.

"You are going to leave Crofton, they say."

He assented, adding, "The pleasantest remembrance I shall carry with me will be the moments passed here. You have taught me how I might have felt toward my mother whom I never knew."

Her eyes for a moment held the startled look they had held in his remembrance once before. She spoke presently:

"I, too, am going away from Crofton. I have at least one faithful friend in this wide world, and I shall go to her."

She held toward him a letter, soiled and blurred, written in a straggling hand and interspersed with foreign phrases, the meaning of which he could not gather. It seemed to him to be the entreaty of an inferior for the pleasure of devoting her service to a much loved mistress. But one line he comprehended clearly. It was dated Calvert county, Maryland.

"It is but little out of my direct route," he exclaimed, in surprise.

She had not known this, but a comparison of notes satisfied her. This discovery produced a change in his plans. He deferred his journey for a day, and when he went Nelly Kent traveled under his protection.

When arrived at the point where their routes separated, she insisted upon completing the distance alone. So they parted with mutual regret—the reputedly crazed, partially helpless woman, and the young, hopeful man. Parted, thinking that they would probably never meet again.

Old Juana, housekeeper to the late Hugh Ellesford, sat alone in her humble cabin. It was gathering twilight without, and a handful of sticks on the hearth sending forth a flickering blaze and an uncertain light within.

The old woman was rocking herself to and fro, and chanting a monotonous plaint in a foreign tongue.

There was a step on the walk without; a figure appeared in the open doorway, but she heeded it not.

"Juana!"

The old woman started up and with a joyful cry welcomed the comer. Sinking at her feet she sobbed forth a prayer of thanksgiving.

"My poor, faithful Juana! Your heart has never failed me."

CHAPTER IV.

AUTUMN had come and was using his magic wand to glorify the landscape. The dusty green, surviving August's fervid heat, was merging into the prismatic tints of red and orange, with endless variety of intermediate shades.

They were breakfasting at the Grange when the postman delivered his daily budget. Adria dealt out the letters as was her custom. Two yellow business-looking envelopes, and another which she scanned curiously. A square, creamy wrapping initialed V. W., and superscribed in a sloping feminine hand.

"Who can this be from, papa? What lady correspondent dare you have, I should like to know."

Mr. Ellesford, already absorbed in a page of commercial note, glanced indifferently at the dainty missive and put it aside until his other communications were examined. One of these gave him apparent annoyance.

"Banks says things are not going smoothly as they should," he observed. "The man has let his head take leave of him, I should think. He seems to have no definite idea of where the fault lies, and supposes it will turn out all right, but thinks it will be well for me to personally look into the matter. I may be obliged to go to the city for a day or two. Confound the business! there's enough of them to attend to it, I should think."

Mr. Ellesford was a man loving his own ease, and long absence from the details of trade, had rendered him disinclined to cope with its fluctuations ever so briefly.

Adria sympathized with her father's annoyance, but hastened to recall his attention to the object occupying her thoughts.

"I'm all curiosity, papa. Do open your other letter."

"Woman's ruling weakness which needs constant repressing. To give you a course of discipline, I'll not touch it."

"Now, papa! You are cruel."

"But you shall read it to me," he concluded.

"Cruelly teasing," added Adria, with a laugh, as her deft fingers stripped the envelope. Womanlike she first read the signature. "Valeria Walton! Who is she?"

"Never heard of her," he declared. "Perhaps the letter may explain." And thus incited Adria read:

"To Joseph Ellesford, of Ellesford Grange:

"DEAR SIR:

"I present to you a few plain facts, and claim at your hands the bounty which I consider my right.

"I am a lineal descendant of the Ellesfords, my mother being the only child of Godfrey, who had the misfortune to be born third son of Hubert Ellesford, founder of the Grange. From this you will perceive that Fate awarded me to that branch of the family forfeiting possession of the patriarchal estates; an unwise allotment if we were predestined to submit always tamely to an imported and unreasonable whim.

"Two years ago I was thrown wholly upon my own resources. Since then I have tried a variety of genteel employments, and am thoroughly disgusted with the idea of earning my own subsistence. An unoccupied existence, with plenty of luxuries at command, is much more in unison with my tastes.

"What I desire is a home in your house, and a small share of the emoluments our mutual ancestor left behind him. If you fear my Ellesford pride may suffer by receiving these in a form which the world might consider charity, you can designate to me some nominal position in your household, providing it embraces no arduous duties and a liberal salary.

"Your reply shall determine in what degree I am yours truly,

VALERIA WALTON."

The address was added in a post-scriptum, together with a request for an immediate reply.

At the conclusion of this decidedly original missive Adria awaited her father's comments.

"Truly, a self-possessed and complacent young lady," he declared. "I wonder if she would like the deeds of the Ellesford homestead delivered into her hands?"

"Papa," said Adria, "I think she is right. You have no greater moral claim to the estate than she possesses."

"What would you have me do?" he asked, a little testily. "Carve the property into sections, and give a part to every vagabond who sets up claim to be a descendant of Hubert Ellesford?"

"At least extend to Miss Walton the privilege she asks—give her a home."

"But, my daughter, consider. She may be disagreeable or unfitted for your daily association."

"Then invite her here for a given time that you may decide of her capacity, temper and character."

After some discussion Mr. Ellesford agreed to this course. Adria herself wrote a cordial invitation and dispatched it in the same day's mail.

Toward sunset she strolled out in the direction of the bay, and during her walk encountered Reginald Templeton. A neighborly sociability now existed between the two families. Adria had embraced an early opportunity to redeem her promise to Colonel Templeton, and from the first had entertained a strong liking for the pale, ennuied woman who reigned as mistress at The Firs. The liking was mutual, and the young girl would have gone oftener with her bright face and cheery manner, had not some subtle instinct withheld her from the place. The elder lady's ill-health was a sufficient pretext to excuse the formal return of Miss Ellesford's friendly calls.

Colonel Templeton had not spoken unadvisedly when he calculated the influence Adria would exert over his son. With the impulsiveness which formed one of the young man's principal characteristics, and which actuated him alike for good or ill, as temporary circumstances inclined, he had speedily yielded up to her the dominion of his affections.

Joining her, as has been said, he timed his pace to suit her steps, and engaged in a desultory conversation. He prosecuted his wooing as he did any enterprise to which he put his hand, with a persistent energy which seldom failed to accomplish its object. He studied his resources as a careful General would plan for a siege, and this very rencontre was the result of mature deliberation.

Adria taking in his physique as defined in the rosy light streaming in from the bay, acknowledged the attractiveness of his manly perfection. Truly, Reginald Templeton had no cause

to complain of the gifts Nature had lavished upon him.

In figure, stalwart and tall, with features symmetrical, but removed from all charge of effeminacy. Eyes, clear gray, which could glow dark and luminous with tender expression, and lips firmly chiseled, but with a slightly sensuous curve. His hair, waved and leonine, fell quite to his neck. Altogether he was of that type of manhood which few women can withstand, and no one was better aware of his personal endowments than Reginald Templeton himself.

With unlimited confidence in his own power, he had not once doubted the termination of his wooing; and planned this meeting for the sole purpose of declaring his passion.

Skillfully directing the conversation, he took advantage of an opportunity it presented, as ere Adria had suspected his drift, told her of a few forcible words of his love, and pleaded for some token of reciprocating favor.

She was surprised and grieved. She had thought of him only as a friend, one growing near to her through common chords of sympathy. Too precipitate action will sometimes mar the completion of a plot, and in the same manner this unexpected confession broke upon her ere any glamour of love had sufficed to blind the eyes of her judgment.

No true woman can listen without pain to an avowal of affection from a man whom she is not prepared to regard with returning favor; and Adria shrunk before his words as though even one contained a hidden blow.

"Adria, my love! will you not answer me?"

She turned her face to him imploringly, speaking in rapid tones:

"Mr. Templeton, oh, please do not urge me! I esteem you—regard you as a valued friend, but I have been totally unprepared for this. Believe me, I would have spared you this pain had it been within my power."

"Adria, give me but one word of assurance that my love is not hopeless and I will be content. I do not ask a decision now, no promise or bond; only tell me that no other man claims precedence in your heart."

"Of that I can give you full assurance. No man exacts from me a higher meed than I hold in my friendship for you."

"Then I shall win you yet, my peerless Adria!"

With his dark eyes glowing full upon her, and his face illumined with passionate tenderness, she felt the force of his words, and was thrilled by them. Handsome and manly, why should he not prove himself the embodiment of her maiden ideal? The prospect was not displeasing.

But, she knew only the better part of his nature. Could she have seen beneath that comely exterior to the deficiencies of moral principle it inclosed: or had she suspected the reckless excesses in which he had buried his soul's purity, she would have shrunk from him as from deadly venom.

She could not see and she did not know. Therefore, she did not gainsay the words which his exultant tones seemed to transform into a prediction.

Twilight was gathering as they retraced their path. A young man habited in a simple dark suit, which might have been worn by a person of almost any degree, was standing irresolute by the roadway. He stepped forward and courteously accosted them.

Before he had time to make known his wishes, there came a clatter of hoofs along the turnpike. A huge black horse, saddled but riderless, with eyeballs flaming and white froth flecking from his mouth, rose through the gathering gloom, plunging and striking viciously at objects as he passed.

Adria shrieked wildly, and young Templeton threw his arm about her with a vague impulse of protection. The animal was bearing full upon them; another instant and his pitiless hoofs would crush them to the earth. Involuntarily they bowed their heads to the coming blow.

The young stranger saw their imminent peril. Scarcely a second could elapse from the knowledge of their danger until it should reach them, but that brief space was sufficient. With every nerve steeled to action, he sprang at the head of the maddened brute, dragging him down with all his might.

Recalled to his senses by the interposition, Reginald hastily drew Adria beyond reach of danger, and went to the assistance of their deliverer. The horse checked in his headlong career was soon thoroughly subdued. Reginald and Adria both recognized in him the Sultan.

The young man who had rendered them such providential aid endeavored to evade their expressions of gratitude.

"I am seeking a place called Ellesford Grange," he said, and they noticed that his voice came gaspingly. "Can you direct me thither?"

Almost while he was speaking he turned white to the lips, and sunk fainting upon the ground.

CHAPTER V.

THE same day witnessing the events chronicled in the preceding chapter saw a man skulking in a strip of woodland separating Ellesford grounds from The Firs. A low-browed, dark-faged fellow, with heavy bull-dog jaws, and a tached hat pulled down over his grizzled hair. His face, scarred and seamed, was rough and lined, and gaunt famine stared from his checked features. His eyes were glittering black, with a trick of glancing sideways from under downcast lids.

Crouching within shadow of the brushwood, watching and waiting as the long hours wore slowly away. Wearying, he strolled back through the wood.

A voice, low but clear, was chanting a plaint which the breeze wafted directly to him. He started, stopped, and listened attentively.

"Life is sad, life is sad
To those weary-hearted;
Sundered wide, sundered wide—
On earth for aye parted.
All alone, all alone,
Life wasted, heart dreary,
Love is flown, love is flown,
Has left me a-weary."

He glanced around keenly. A little cabin stood at a short distance, with a thin coil of blue smoke dragging lazily up from the clay chimney. No living creature was in sight.

He strode over a few paces of open ground intervening, and approaching noiselessly, looked in through the square window.

A small apartment furnished with a few of the most necessary articles of life. An old woman, crouching before an open wood fire, was stirring some mixture in a tin vessel which gave forth a fragrant odor as of barks or roots.

"Old Juana has a patient on hand," muttered the man.

The woman, glancing up, had a glimpse of his face hastily withdrawn from the window. This decided him, whether or not he had previously meant to accost her. Slouching his hat lower over his face, he stepped upon the threshold.

"Good woman, will you give to a poor traveler but a crust of bread and a cup of water?"

"I keep no inn," she answered, surlily, without moving.

"I have no money and am suffering for food," he persisted. "For the love of Heaven give me something, if it be but the scraps you would not use a dog."

His emaciated figure, and the wolfish expression of hunger in his face, appealed to her. She went to some shelves in a corner, bringing forward bread and some fragments of meat. Placing them upon the pine table, and adding a tin cup of water, she motioned him to it. He ate ravenously, but keeping his face averted from her sight. At first she observed him indifferently, but some slight, peculiar motion attracted her attention. She noted the stealthy glances about him when she pretended to be occupied and unobserving.

The voice he had heard broke into song again, and he started at hearing it near him. Turning his head to listen, Juana obtained her first direct view of his face.

With a spring like an enraged tiger, she was upon him, her skinny fingers clasp his throat. Age had not deprived her of all agile action, and for the moment the strength of youth had returned to her.

"Where is the child?—my nurse-child? What did you do with the child?" she hissed in his ear.

Her hold on his throat relaxed, and he wrenched himself violently from her grasp. She sprang at him again, clinging and shrieking.

The door of an inner room was thrown open, and Nelly Kent appeared within it. For a single instant the man stared at her as though doubting an identity; then, flinging the old woman aside, dashed through the open doorway and disappeared.

"My poor Juana! are you much hurt?" asked Nelly, stooping over her and touching her gently with her one uninjured hand.

Juana struggled to her feet, her face wearing a sullen, blank expression she had more than once successfully assumed.

"'Twas a foul-mouthed cur," she grumbled. "He called me an ill-favored hag, and got a taste of my nails for it. Old Juana can hold her own with the like of him, yet!"

Colonel Templeton rode leisurely homeward. He had been out from early morning, and both horse and rider seemed fagged. He patted the beast upon his arching neck.

"A good day's service, Sultan. Well done, my boy. Whoa, sir, steady! What is it you see?"

They were passing through the neck of woodland, and the horse, snuffing the air, grew restless. A dark figure advanced from the shadow and laid hold of the bridle-rein.

"Back, fellow!" commanded Colonel Templeton, raising his whip.

"Get off your horse, Alan Templeton," returned the man, unheeding the threatening gesture.

Colonel Templeton's hand dropped.

"Pedro Cardini!" he ejaculated.

"Hush! no names," cried the man, glancing around him fearfully. "Dismount, quickly."

Colonel Templeton vaulted from his saddle easily.

"What do you want with me?" he asked.

"Money! In Heaven's name—money!"

"Ask, and it shall be given you," sneered his companion, mockingly.

"I am penniless, starving, and hunted from the faces of men. Money I must and will have, at any cost."

The man's desperate face betrayed his earnestness.

Colonel Templeton reflected a moment.

"What is your offense, now?" he asked.

"What is that to you?" the man returned, doggedly. "It is enough that I served your purpose when you wished."

"You were paid for it!"

"Ay, but I must have more. Remember that I hold your secret, Alan Templeton."

The hearer's brow flushed darkly, but he restrained his rage.

"If I comply with your demand, what surety have I that you will not again molest me?"

"Surety or none, you will give me what I ask, or I expose you to the world."

"You are in my power. You are flying from justice, and I can put officers on your track within an hour."

"If you do, you shall share my prison."

Colonel Templeton's hand sought his side, and was uplifted with the glittering barrel of a revolver displayed.

"I could shoot you down like a dog, and no one would lay reproach to me."

The man's face grew dangerous. With a cat-leap he grasped the weapon and endeavored to wrench it from the other's hand. In the scuffle that ensued a barrel was discharged.

The horse with a loud neigh of fright shot away through the falling gloom.

The struggle between the two men was a short one. The one all nerve and sinew, the other weak from long privation and wasted almost to a skeleton, Colonel Templeton's knee was on his adversary's breast, the man completely in his power. It suited him to be merciful.

"Get up!" he said, himself resuming his feet. "You have some mettle left, and I may need you yet. You shall have, not money, but what will serve you better now—hiding."

CHAPTER VI.

ADRIA knelt beside the prostrate form in the roadway. Tenderly she lifted his head from the dust, and laved his face with her handkerchief, which Reginald brought dripping from a brook near by.

A dark patrician face it seemed to her, colorless now, not handsome certainly, but with the mark of power upon it, and hair crisping in tiny rings about his forehead.

Nothing appeals to woman's heart so readily or forcibly as strong manhood reduced to helplessness. And this more truly if it is brought about in the cause of herself or of humanity. And so Adria's heart thrilled with warm sympathy in behalf of this strange young man.

With a word she dispatched Reginald to the Grange for assistance to have him removed thither. It came in the form of a stout servant or two, and Mr. Ellesford himself, all gratitude to the youth who had preserved his daughter from injury, perhaps death.

The men lifted him in strong, willing arms and bore him carefully forward.

At that instant Colonel Templeton walking

rapidly approached them. The immediate excitement had prevented much thought being given to his fate. But now he was received with joyful though not boisterous acclamation.

"We feared some serious accident had befallen you," said Reginald, briefly sketching the scene lately transpired.

"A chance shot in the vicinity startled the Sultan as I had dismounted to let him drink from the gully," explained his father, unmoved by the recital.

Hours afterward Kenneth Hastings opened his eyes to consciousness in the Grange. A physician, speedily sent for but tardy in coming, was subjecting him to a close examination. An arm lay limp and helpless at his side, dislocated at both wrist and elbow. His side was crushed and flesh torn where a sharp hoof had descended with cruel force. He was suffering most acute agony.

All that could be done for him was speedily executed. A soporific was administered at short intervals, with directions to increase the dose should rising irritation render it without immediate effect. The greatest apprehension was of internal injury—the best medicine for the time required, perfect quiet and rest.

A few days haunted with visions hideous and enchanting, during all of which time he was kept more or less under the influence of narcotics. Then he awoke in a languid state with no energy to lift so much as a finger.

He was lying on a snowy bed in a small alcove, commanding the view of a wide, pleasant room into which it opened. He took it all in slowly, as his indolent senses responded to their proper action.

Walls hung with heavy paper, creamy white with vivid crimson clusters and golden arabesques in place of cornices. The ceiling, high-arched in the center, admitted a softened light through a sash of ground glass. A glass door opened upon a veranda shaded by creeping vines, which were now drooping beneath the breath of early frosts. The carpet, rich and yielding, was gorgeous without being glaring; there was a divan covered with crimson velvet, and a heavy, stained table showing the natural grain, unlike any wood this country produces.

The apartment and its belongings impressed him familiarly. But, when he attempted to analyze the feeling, to trace the resemblance to any place he might have seen, it dissolved into the certainty of impossibility.

But, even thought was an effort, and he dismissed it, content with the mere knowledge of being.

During all this time Adria tended him carefully. He had a vague remembrance of a graceful form, a fair, pitying face, and the lingering touch of soft womanly hands; but placed them as a phantasm which lingered with sweet persistency. He, poor fellow! had experienced little of woman's care throughout the life he remembered.

She came in now with some *morceau*, befitting the invalid's condition, finding him for the first time thoroughly conscious.

With sight of her all came back to him. The highway, with two figures approaching, the great black horse bearing down upon them. This, then, was the secret of his present weakness. Never mind, he had succeeded in saving her, and was content.

The record of illness is necessarily tedious. But the following days, with Adria's constant companionship, and never ceasing efforts to contribute to his comfort, were to Hastings like a glimpse into some hitherto unknown Arcadia.

Let him enjoy his new-found well-spring of happiness while he may, while we revert to a brief retrospect now become necessary.

After taking possession of the estate, Joseph Ellesford still retained an interest in the firm with which he had hitherto been identified. Later, when Mr. Stratton, the senior partner, retired from the business, he purchased this share, and controlled the greater portion of the stock. Judiciously investing capital which met with fortunate returns, the establishment soon rose to rank among the first, if not the first, of its class in the city. It was known as a substantial house, and had stood firm during a financial panic which swayed even the best of its contemporaries.

Of late some seemingly safe enterprises had resulted badly. They had invested largely in various products, which a changing market rendered unsalable. But these losses did not satisfactorily account for deficits every day rendered more apparent. Banks, the oldest member of the present firm, and who held position as

active manager, remained unaccountably apathetic. It was only at the urgent solicitation of the younger partners that he communicated with Mr. Ellesford regarding the circumstances.

This was the position when young Hastings appeared on the scene of action. The firm had bought largely of the Russell Brothers. Years of dealing had given them an unlimited credit, which they had used successfully during their later purchases. The amount of their indebtedness, swelling to a large figure, had caused the factory owners some inconvenience, but they refrained from pressing payment, fearing the loss of a remunerative patronage.

At last patience reached its limit, and they resolved upon prompt action. To this end, Ellesford, Banks & Co. had been placed first upon the list of delinquents whom Kenneth Hastings was deputed to visit.

Banks received him cordially, admitted the claim, deplored the neglect which had overlooked its settlement long before, and sent him seventy miles into the country on a nominal errand to the larger partner.

And here occurs what may be termed a coincidence. Upon the day witnessing Hastings's interview with the managing partner, a telegram was put in Colonel Templeton's hands, reading:

"B. is fleeced. Must have assistance or go under. Meet you at St. George's Center to-morrow."
(Signed) "J. S."

Toward St. George's Center Colonel Templeton had ridden with the breaking morning light, and returned with the sunset as we have seen.

A week had passed ere Hastings's mind embraced aught pertaining to business. The remembrance of it recalled him from his pleasant inactivity to the knowledge that his employers' interests were suffering from his enforced neglect. He hastened to procure an interview with Mr. Ellesford, and imparted his commission.

The Russell Brothers were about to add to their immense manufacturing establishment a department for printing their fabrics from original designs. They had obtained patents for a great variety of designs, executed by well-known practical artists. They hoped this department might receive the support of their patrons.

Banks received the announcement favorably and contemplated a large order, but could not promise positively without the acquiescence of Mr. Ellesford. And Hastings, on the alert for the furtherance of his employers' interests, had consented to seek a personal interview.

Mr. Ellesford heard his business and immediately gave his hearty concurrence.

"I can't understand why Banks should send you on such a needless journey," he added. "His judgment has always guided such details. But it has proved a fortunate circumstance through means of the inestimable service rendered me and mine."

Hastings was plunged in deep thought for a moment.

"Mr. Ellesford," he said, "this proceeding of your partner has given me an impression, which may or may not prove correct. He confided to me that the firm was laboring under slight temporary embarrassments. May it not be that these are heavier than he wishes to admit, and he has taken this means to gain time for raising money to satisfy the immediate claim I presented?"

Mr. Ellesford thought it improbable. But he concluded it would be well to inspect affairs personally at an early date.

"And I," said Hastings, "must no longer intrude upon your hospitality. With your permission, I will accompany you to Washington."

"You—you, with your fractured ribs and helpless arm? Pooh, pooh, boy! you will not be able to travel under a month."

This decree was seconded by his physician, and, *bon gre, mal gre*, Hastings remained at the Grange. It was by no means a disagreeable alternative to him. Had it not been that duty commanded his action, I doubt if he would have cared ever to remove himself from the pleasing spell which Adria's presence had woven about him.

And Adria did not long remain insensible to the noble qualities possessed by the patient Fate had thrown within her charge.

"Pity is akin to love."

And from the first Hastings had been received into the immeasurable depths of her tender compassion.

Mr. Ellesford made a short trip to the city. Banks received him cordially, proceeded to volubly explain the manner in which the busi-

ness had been slightly involved. All had come right now, he declared, and Mr. Ellesford, easily satisfied, forbore to press personal investigations.

It was during his absence that Adria's note of invitation received a response in the person of Miss Walton, whose coming broke in upon the delightful absorption of each other's society enjoyed by the two young people at the Grange.

CHAPTER VII.

MISS WALTON sat with Adria, in the room of the latter. She had already fallen in with the customs at the Grange, aptly as if she had been acquainted with them all her life. This hour Adria usually devoted to reading, but, in the presence of her guest, was agreeably conversational.

Only in fiction do women devote themselves to the study of each other. In actual life they meet, and, with a glance, decide the status each shall occupy in the opinion and confidence of themselves.

It had been so with these two. Valeria absorbed her young hostess for a second with cool, scrutinizing eyes, and the result was instantaneous conviction:

"Pliable, if warily managed, and with absurd conscientiousness which may be worked upon to advantage. If openly opposed, an enemy who will not be readily vanquished; if conciliated, she may prove a powerful ally."

Adria, in the same instant, determined that her guest was a woman who would win universal admiration wherever she moved, but one whom she could never admit into the secret chamber of her best sympathies. No fine chords of their nature would chime in unison. They might dwell together beneath the same roof for years, and their affections approach no closer than during the first moment.

So the two women had read each other, while they exchanged primal greetings. It remained for continued acquaintance and opportunity to prove how nearly correct they had been.

"I hope we shall not prove rivals," said Valeria, taking up a broken thread of the conversation. "We will make admirable foils. Are you jealous?"

"I don't know," returned Adria, laughingly; "it is a quality I have had no occasion to test."

"I love homage," asserted Valeria; "and if I tread on dangerous ground you must let me know. We are to be friends, are we not?"

"Certainly," Adria replied, with some surprise. "Why should you doubt that?"

"That stupid business of the Ellesford will! You know how I feel about it; but you may consider me an intruder."

"Not I," returned Adria, with some warmth.

"I agree with you that it was unjust, and shall willingly combine my efforts with yours in extorting such reparation as is possible now."

Miss Walton surveyed her with slow credulity.

"Ah, well! We will not discuss it. Come here, until we see which is most Ellesford."

Adria permitted her companion to draw her before the long mirror, and listened amusedly to her comparisons.

Of the same type, they were totally unlike. Valeria was large and fully developed; her face fair and regular, but passive; her hair light brown, with a satiny sheen, and arranged in elaborate bandeaux, which sat well upon her somewhat massive head. Her hands and feet were of proportionate size and finely shaped.

Adria's features were less regular, but clearly defined; her complexion variable, with skin close-textured and pure. Her lips were thin and mobile, where Valeria's were full and expressive of dominant passion. Adria's eyes were large, clear gray, and fringed with long dark lashes; Valeria's hazel, with light brows, which detracted from the force they might otherwise have denoted. Adria's hair was yellow, glittering and rippled—her figure slight and lithe.

Miss Walton criticised impartially.

"I am nothing but Ellesford," she concluded, "and you are pure Saxon, without any of the family characteristics."

"You have a correct eye, provided you do not already know that I am not an Ellesford," Adria answered.

"Are you not?" demanded Valeria.

Adria explained.

Their conversation drifting back, naturally turned upon Hugh Ellesford and the mysteries connected with his life and death. With the facts Valeria was already acquainted, and Adria proceeded to give her such deductions and details as had come into general observation.

"And the secret room is the one in which

you have domiciled your young hero?" half questioningly.

"Yes. Papa made but few alterations upon it, the chief of which are the glass door, and the veranda in front. The furniture is almost the same, and every care is taken that it shall not be injured. He has an idea that it may yet furnish the clew which may lead to the apprehension of the murderer."

"Could no information be derived from the woman's garments which you say remained?"

"Nothing. The dresses were rich but bore no mark to indicate the name of either maker or owner. The handkerchief is monogrammed, but so over-wrought that it is impossible to decide upon the letters. I have kept it since its return by the detectives."

She crossed the room, and took from her toilet-case a tiny box, from which she shook out the handkerchief.

It was of fine lace, elaborately embroidered, yellow now with age.

Valeria examined it critically.

"The first initial may be either I or J; the second is unmistakably, C; the last F or T."

Adria smiled.

"That much was determined upon its discovery, but the clew afforded was too vague."

So Valeria replaced the discolored bit of lace no wiser, and took her departure to an adjoining apartment, which had been assigned to her use.

Once there, she dropped no facial mask, no evil passions distorted her serene countenance. Instead, her eyes received a deeper shade, her lips a contemplative curve, which might have belonged to a guileless maiden's day-dream.

But Miss Walton was not given to dreaming, especially when her interests would derive greater aid from active plotting. Should this girl, this alien, inherit the broad lands on which she had no lineal claim, of which she was rightfully heir-apparent? Certainly not, if Valeria Walton's fertile brain could concoct a scheme which would dispossess her of them.

Reginald Templeton came in during the day. He was regular in his attendance at the Grange, and inquired always, in a patronizing way, for Hastings. His manner did not tend to ingratiate him with Adria, who, brought into daily communion with the young man, had early discovered him possessed of mental qualifications far in advance of the station he occupied.

Kenneth had ventured into the parlor for the first time. Bolstered in a great arm-chair, with a stand drawn to his elbow containing a crystal dish filled with grapes and oranges, his cheerful appearance betokened him a very resigned invalid.

"Ah, my good fellow, glad to see you up again," said Reginald, advancing and extending his hand. "I have had no previous opportunity to express my thanks or applaud your bravery. Let me do both now. I shall endeavor soon to express my gratitude in a more substantial form than by mere words, and which I trust may in a measure compensate you for the loss of time sustained."

Adria who was by, felt her cheeks flush hotly. Kenneth replied, quietly:

"I can not think my action embraced any thing worthy of praise, and the inconvenience I may have experienced through it, has been doubly repaid by the kind care I have received."

"You would not estimate your services so lightly if you knew from what a precious treasure you warded danger," persisted Reginald, who, in his wooing, sometimes let his zeal get the better of his discretion.

"Life is dear to all of us," Adria hastened to interpose, and then skillfully guided the conversation to a different theme.

Valeria who had silently witnessed the whole drew her own conclusions.

When Reginald rose to depart Adria went out with him into the grounds.

"You must see my dahlias," she had said; but, reaching them, the regal blossoms seemed to claim but superficial attention.

"Reginald, I must beg that you will not offer money to Mr. Hastings. He is a thorough gentleman and can not but feel it an insult. I understand your motive, and honor it accordingly—" Reginald winced beneath the slight sarcasm—"but am confident you will grant me this favor."

"But, Adria, you don't understand these work-people. Money is their sole end and aim in existence, and this young man is but a better type of the class."

"Nevertheless, I must persist in my request. Though Mr. Hastings is but a workingman, he is fully equal or superior to the many calling themselves gentlemen whom I have yet met."

Her face flushed angrily, and Reginald has-

tened to repair the mistake which he saw he had committed.

"Of course I can deny you no boon in my power to grant, *ma belle*. But, what can I do to show my grateful thanks for your preservation? Oh, Adria, life would have been so desolate had harm befallen you!"

"Mr. Templeton," said Adria, steadily, "I fear I have permitted you to entertain a fallacious hope. If I have in my manner encouraged the sentiment with which you have honored me, I entreat that you will believe it was done unintentionally. No misunderstanding must exist for the future. I shall esteem you as a valued friend, and hope to retain an equal place in your regard."

"Oh, Adria! I vexed you sorely, I see, but your punishment is too cruel. Forgive me, and do not take away the hope which has sustained me."

Adria's eyes grew humid—his voice was so full of humiliation and entreaty. But, she had grown to know herself better since that other time he had pleaded to her.

"I am sorry," she said. "It pains me more than you can know, but it will be misery to us both if we endeavor to evade what time can only make more apparent. Perhaps it will be better if you do not come here for a while—until you forget your disappointment. Good-by, now, my friend!"

She extended her hand and he imprisoned it in his grasp.

"Adria, I will not take this as a final answer. I angered you, but you will forgive me and take me back again!"

"Indeed—indeed, you must accept my decision as final."

"You told me that your heart was free, and so long as I am assured of that I will never give you up," he cried, still holding her fast.

A quick, warm glow flashed over her cheek and brow. He noted it and a jealous intuition possessed him. His eyes burned into hers for an instant with a desire to read her soul's secret.

"Perhaps I have mistaken," he said, with the quiet bitterness which with him boded more than violent anger. "How far may our young plebeian have influenced your change of feeling?"

"I believe we are all equal members of a free country, sir, and I do not recognize your right to catechise me."

She turned toward the house, and Reginald strode heavily down the graveled drive.

A few days later Colonel Templeton drove with his wife over to the Grange. The distance was short and the weather dreamy Indian summer.

They made but a formal call, and all the while Mrs. Templeton seemed strangely ill at ease. Adria attributed this to her nervous disease, but Valeria, whose calm eyes absorbed every thing without giving any evidence, saw that her glance wandered uneasily, and that she shivered although the temperature was mild.

At the threshold her handkerchief fluttered from her hand, and Valeria was about to return it, when some idea occurring, which brought a slight start of surprise, she concealed it in the folds of her dress.

"Adria," she said, when they were alone again, "who was the lady Hugh Ellesford was to have married?"

"Irene Clayton, the present Mrs. Templeton," Adria answered. "I sometimes think she is haunted with a ghost of what 'might have been.' I am sure her husband does not make her happy. But, why do you ask?" noticing the strange, triumphant glitter of Valeria's eyes.

"Can you keep a secret?"

"Don't try me unless you believe it."

"I am sure you are to be trusted. Come with me," leading the way to Adria's apartment. "Chance has revealed something which may be the end of Ariadne's thread."

She drew forth the handkerchief. It was of rich fine lace, such as any lady might carry, with initials elaborately embroidered. Adria glanced at it at first indifferently, and then, as something of Valeria's import shot into her mind, she tremblingly brought forth the other one which was connected with the dark mystery.

Their pattern and texture were slightly different, and they appeared to belonged to separate ages—one clear and snowy white, the other yellow and dim, but the monogram was unmistakably the same.

CHAPTER VIII.

COLONEL TEMPLETON was in his library. It was a light, cosy nook fitted with shelves and cases, a desk, a table, and one or two lounging-chairs. It communicated with a suite comprising sitting and breakfast-rooms, but the folding-doors belonging to this immediate apartment had been doubled; professedly in consideration that Colonel Templeton's ready cash was always stored in his desk rendering the necessity of security; probably to insure his private consultations from eavesdropping propensities of his retainers.

He glanced up at his son as he came in, but continued his work of assorting loose papers which littered the table before him. He was a methodical man of business. The bills and receipts properly packaged and labeled, he turned with sharp scrutiny to Reginald who was still standing.

The young man was looking heavy-eyed and haggard. His hair was disheveled and dress carelessly worn. Truth to tell, he had slept none the previous night, and had come in at daylight from a scene of bacchanalian revelry. But he inherited his father's iron constitution, and the excesses which would have utterly debased most of men told but slightly on him.

"You are dissipating too heavily, Reginald," said his father, calmly. "A befogged brain will never accomplish your object."

"One must take some comfort in life," returned the other doggedly. "I think you will find me clear enough to comprehend any thing you may wish to impart."

There was but little sympathy between the two. They were much alike; pitiless, unyielding, unscrupulous. Their dispositions tallied nearly as cynical middle-age and impulsive youth can.

"Sit down," said the older man, pointing to a chair into which Reginald sunk gloomily. "If we are to co-operate in any particular we must reduce the matter to a purely business arrangement, and so regard its different phases. You still retain your desire to marry the girl, Adria Ellesford?"

"I believe it is not a Templeton attribute to waver in a purpose. I have informed you of my determination."

The Colonel smiled with grim satisfaction.

"Will you inform me why you sought my assistance?"

"I thought I had explained. I am virtually banished from the place, at least for the present. No doubt a little catering will restore me by-and-by, but meantime other influences may gain the ascendancy. She has elevated this young Hastings to be a kind of demi-god in her fancy, whom she is bound to worship after the orthodox precedent of romantic young ladies and their preservers. If he remains at the Grange he may work some serious mischief. Get the fellow out of the way, and I can prosecute my suit without difficulty."

"But if as you fear, he has obtained such hold upon her, will his removal effect the desired end? Will she not rather brood over his absence and look forward to a reunion? None but a fool would neglect such an opportunity to gain wealth and position as her partiality presents, and my own observation teaches me that he is by no means indifferent."

"Neither you nor I, sir, have much faith in woman's constancy," returned Reginald, coolly. "But I do not apprehend that matters are yet endangered. At any rate, I have not yet seen the woman who could long resist my advances."

He straightened himself and shook out his leoline hair with self-conscious pride. He had full confidence in the irresistible power exerted by his handsome face and specious tongue.

"Faith, if rumors speak truly you have created no small havoc among them. But you must remember Adria Ellesford is not of the common type. I give her credit for considerable penetration and more independence."

"Which shall lead her to acknowledge me," asserted Reginald, positively. "I think, sir, you are wandering from the strict business view you proposed taking of the affair. You embrace her claims ardently as I could desire from an outside party."

"I think you will admit the pertinence of my observations. Do you suppose she is most easily influenced by suggestions of duty or of impulse?"

"The former, unquestionably."

Colonel Templeton remained silent for a moment.

"I think," he said, "it would be injudicious to attempt forcing the young man's departure. To do so would involve mystery and deceit

which might arouse sympathy with him. He can not remain much longer and the impression he may have created will die a natural death. I think I can suggest a surer method of preferring your cause, but first I shall wish to settle preliminaries."

He paused. Reginald awaited silently.

"You must be aware that my finances are in a rather complicated state. I am in need of a considerable sum, the possession of which will advance both your chances of success and my own interests."

"You wish it furnished from my secured portion?"

"If your filial duty suggests such a course I shall not refuse your kindness."

Reginald's lip curled scornfully.

"How much?" he asked.

"You shall yourself determine the amount retained. I shall require the loan of twenty thousand dollars for a few weeks."

Reginald started to his feet with an oath.

"Half I possess," he exclaimed.

"I shall convince you of the safety of the enterprise. What would you say to investing it in the firm of Ellesford, Banks & Co.?"

The other looked amazed.

"Explain yourself," he demanded.

Colonel Templeton was commonly a man of few words, but the conversation which followed was lengthy and explicit. Its import and result will occur in proper time.

One minor item was decided upon. It was deemed expedient that Reginald should make speedy peace at the Grange, but should forbear to press his suit for a time.

Accordingly, he went over that very day and gained a few private words with Adria.

"Forgive me," he said humbly. "I will not pain you again, but you must let me see you sometimes. I will be contented with that. Away from you I am not myself. I grow desperate and am frightened at my own promptings. With your sympathy attending me I will endeavor to crush my hopeless love into a friend's devotion."

She was touched by his submission. There is no surer means of winning woman's sympathy than making her believe you feel your own unworthiness and her unapproachable superiority.

So Reginald was received again a daily visitor. He was tender and deferential in his conduct to Adria, but withdrew himself from obtrusive notice.

Valeria and he were now thrown much together. It was in the nature of the man to pay court to every woman. He delighted to exert his fascinating power, and was merciless in witnessing its effects. Miss Walton was a beautiful woman, and her worldly stoicism, which he was not long in penetrating, invited him to a clash of arms.

Valeria was a thoroughly selfish woman, and she had centered her ambition upon a grand ultimatum. Imbued with the fancy of injustice indirectly meted to her, "grown with her growth and strengthened with her strength," had come the determination to regain her natural Ellesford right. To some day reign mistress of the family wealth was the incentive which had directed her mind for years—which had brought her to the Grange in the hope of forcing the result.

But now a dangerous counter influence was brought to bear against her preconcerted plans. Reginald Templeton, young, debonair and courtly, succeeded in that which hosts of true lovers had failed to accomplish.

When the knowledge dawned upon her, she shut herself in her own room and faced the truth in its uncompromising nakedness.

She had found a phase in her nature she had not suspected herself of possessing. It seemed as if three Valerias had suddenly blossomed from the one. One, herself, sat quietly down and listened to the pleading of the other two; the first presenting her ambitious aim in all its splendid tints, the last using all the eloquence of love to gain the field. The struggle was tedious and painful, but she would not give up the study of her lifetime to an impulse springing into action in an hour.

Reginald Templeton she loved. Joseph Ellesford, her distant kinsman, a man who had lived more years than had been numbered since her father's birth, she determined to marry.

So she buried the quiet spirit in outer calm, and passed days seemingly tranquil but agitated by the revulsions of a nature so thoroughly selfish that she could not willingly relinquish either coveted object.

Early winter crept stealthily on. Kenneth mended but slowly. An epistle had come from the Russell Brothers, stiffly worded but imbued with real kindly feeling. They had taken un-

precedented interest in this young agent. In it they commended the zeal which had insured early settlement from Ellesford, Banks & Co., regretted his accident, and intimated that, though the business intrusted to him was important, he should not actively engage again until fully recovered.

He knew that he must now soon close his pleasant reprieve. He counted the days as they fled as a miser might regret telling out his gold.

Mr. Ellesford had grown very fond of the young man. He found him an intelligent companion, with moral principle denoting him worthy of every trust. Gradually he had come to confide in his judgment, and sought his advice in many details.

The two men were alone one morning, enjoying the city papers just arrived, when a messenger from the telegraphic office came in haste.

He bore a dispatch, evidently indited in angry haste:

"Have you been asleep? or why, in Heaven's name have you not acted? The firm is hopelessly involved, and Banks gone—we hope to the devil, as he deserves."

"(Signed.) CLARKE & NELSON."

Clarke and Nelson were the two small capitalists embraced in the Co.

CHAPTER IX.

The two women in the little woodland but lived quietly. During her master's time, Juana, like him, had been a recluse, and since had discouraged the attempts made by a few curious villagers to establish communication with her.

Her sullen reticence invited no intercourse, and those who had attempted it were soon content to let her enjoy the solitude she desired; the more readily that an annual stipend accorded her by Joseph Ellesford rendered her independent of official aid.

When Nelly Kent appeared with her the country people wondered a little. But as their unobtrusive existence betrayed nothing, on which to feed curiosity, their daily quiet was disturbed by no importunate meddling.

That this calm was not perfect peace to either was quite evident. Since the day the strange dark man had penetrated into the cabin, Juana had been constantly on her guard. She seemed argus-eyed in her vigilance. She prowled through the adjacent woodland at unreasonable hours, and no living object approaching the place escaped her observation. But she had not again found him for whom she watched and sought.

Nelly, occupied with her own thoughts, saw nothing of the strangeness of the old woman's conduct. Restless or brooding in turn herself, an intense desire was consuming her, which one morning found utterance in a resolve.

"Juana," she said, "I am going to the Grange."

"Oh, Miss Nelly!" cried Juana, in consternation, the name falling from her lips awkwardly, as though they could not accustom themselves to the utterance.

"I can not rest. I can not be satisfied until I have been there. Something stronger than my will draws me thither; I have tried to resist it in vain. My going may not be for the better, but it can not be for worse."

Juana's face looked troubled, but she did not attempt to gainsay this determination. Nelly wrapped herself in a plain dark cloak and hood, and set forth for the Grange. She glanced back once at Juana who was watching her receding figure, and noted her anxious look.

"True, faithful heart," she murmured, her eyes filling.

"Oh, how can she—" moaned Juana—"how can she go there where that awful horror will rise up before her again?"

Valeria and Adria had breakfasted alone and retired to the common parlor. The former, with eyes half-closed and hands indolently folded, lay back in her chair before the glowing grate, basking in its warmth. She loved ease and idleness, and was now enabled, for the first time, to indulge in them. Adria was busied with some bit of woman's work, and as her hands mingled with the warm-hued worsteds she was fashioning, her lips curved tenderly and her thoughts flew over the mystic pathway trod only by youth's happy fancies.

Mr. Ellesford, accompanied by Kenneth, had departed for Washington the preceding day. They had gone in haste, the former explaining to his daughter that business connected with the firm had called him unexpectedly, but in such a manner that she should infer nothing of its serious nature.

So Valeria and Adria were alone for the time.

A voice singularly clear and sweet broke upon the morning air. A woman, pausing before the low window, was chanting a joyous anthem. Adria listened to the tones chiming with her own happy thoughts, but as they died away, she approached the casement, and swinging it open, bade the singer enter.

Complying, the woman stepped over the low sill, her dark eyes wandering restlessly about the apartment, but her passive face revealed no gleam of expression.

"Who are you?" asked Adria.

She did not reply immediately. Her roving glance comprehended her questioner presently; but she seemed to have forgotten that she had been addressed.

"Shall I sing for you?" she asked.

Then, without awaiting a reply, she began a refrain, low and solemn, which brought a film of moisture to the eyes of one tender-hearted listener. Valeria regarded the stranger curiously as she entered, but placing her as a strolling mendicant, lapsed into indifference.

"Poor creature!" said Adria to her, in an undertone. "She is evidently distraught, but has certainly been a lady. How sweetly she sings!"

Valeria nodded acquiescence, and thought to herself how tiresome were Miss Ellesford's whims, one of which had brought this straggler within. For herself, Valeria would have thrown her a penny and ordered her from the grounds.

"I shall manage very differently when I am Mrs. Ellesford," she reflected, and in the contemplation of that future lapsed into unobserving indifference again.

Adria rung the bell, ordering the servant to prepare a simple repast for the strange visitor, and herself accompanied her to the breakfast-room.

Nelly Kent (the reader has inferred that it was she) sat down to the damask-spread board on which the Ellesford silver, just out of the housekeeper's polishing hands, was glittering in full array.

A close, suffocating sensation came over her, the dull, dead ache of her heart intensified until she thought she must scream out her agony. Nevertheless, she sipped her tea silently; and Adria, with delicate tact, intended to relieve all feeling of embarrassment, crossed to the opposite side of the apartment, where the housekeeper was engaged in cleansing the China service.

"Do you know who she is, Davis?" Adria inquired, softly.

"It's the poor, dazed lady that's took up with old Juana," returned Davis, in the same tone. "I know her by her crippled arm, which the maids who ha' seen her walking in the grounds ha' told me of."

Adria had not observed the helpless member, concealed as it had been by the woman's large cloak. She turned, with renewed pity in her eyes, to find the place at the table vacant, the figure which had been there a moment before noiselessly vanished.

Davis set up a cry of alarm and began to hastily count the silver. Her apprehensions were quieted somewhat on finding it correct. Adria was amazed.

"She must have gone back to the parlor," she said, after a moment's thought.

"Sure enough," admitted Davis. "The front entrance is locked, and she'd ha' passed us going out the side way."

But investigation proved she had not gone back to the parlor. Valeria, sitting idly as she had been left, had not seen her. Adria, perplexed, went back to the breakfast-room; and Valeria, whose senses were always on the alert, even when her manner least indicated it, remembered hearing the sound of an opening door a moment previous, and herself proceeded to reconnoiter.

Nelly Kent, finding herself unobserved, crept silently from the room and sped swiftly through the different passage-ways. Not a moment did she pause to consider her course, but made her way to the arched chamber.

With tremulous haste she knelt by the little dark table, and with fingers fumbling the carved work of its pendent side, found and pressed a spring concealed there. A tiny drawer sprang out as if by magic, disclosing a compact roll of yellow parchment, and a locket studded with brilliants, with a long slender-linked chain attached. The trinket was dented deeply, and the chain, pliable in its virgin purity, was bent and entangled. She took it up reverently.

"I may wear it again now," she murmured. "Oh, my love, my love!"

The rustle of a woman's dress caught her

quick ear, and the little drawer shot back to its place none too soon. Valeria upon the threshold, caught the glitter of something in the woman's hand conveyed quickly to her bosom.

Valeria pounced down upon Nelly Kent with cat-like agility.

"What have you stolen?" she demanded.

Nelly met her searching gaze with a vacant stare, then thrusting her hand into her bosom drew forth a common rosary and began telling the beads, as though oblivious of the other's presence.

Valeria was not satisfied. She thought she had seen the gleam of gems, but at the instant Adria appeared in the doorway, and she forbore to press the conviction.

"Had you not better have her searched?" she suggested, as Nelly quietly accompanied them back to the parlor.

Adria gave her an indignant glance.

"I am sure there is no need," she replied.

"She is not responsible for her actions in wandering harmlessly about, and even were she mischievously inclined there is nothing portable she could have procured in so short a time which we would not at a glance have found missing."

In her heart Nelly silently blessed the generous girl, but outwardly preserved her passive demeanor.

In a few moments she grew restless, and, intimating her desire to depart, Adria let her out at the grand entrance door, bestowing a few kind words at parting.

"Heaven forgive me," muttered Nelly to herself, as she walked slowly down the broad pathway, "if I have made a mockery of any form, but Juana's beads have stood me good service!"

Out of the grounds into the highway, wholly absorbed in her own thoughts until a rough shout aroused her.

"Out of the way with ye, I say!"

An open carriage, driven at a leisurely pace was now drawn up by the surly coachman. Occupied in herself, she was crossing the wheel-track in its direct course.

A lady, the only occupant of the vehicle, leaned forward to chide the man for his impatience. Nelly, glancing upward, met her gaze and fell back a pace, her face blanched to livid paleness. The other, for a second-only, startled, then recognizing the death-like countenance, caught her breath in a moaning gasp and sunk back senseless among the carriage-cushions.

It was Mrs. Templeton.

CHAPTER X.

AFFAIRS at the establishment in Washington appeared fully as bad as represented. The smaller partners, Clarke and Nelson, were steady, thorough men, but lacking that important qualification, brains. Banks had wielded the whole of the business machinery. Had been, so to speak, the power driving it all, while they were the cogs and wheels working in obedience to his will.

Implicit confidence had been placed in him. For a long period he was known to be speculating largely with interests foreign to the firm, but, as his own private account was ample, this gave rise to no uneasiness.

It was not until considerable sums had been quietly withdrawn, which at the time, his companions in trade believed invested in behalf of the firm, and when bills supposed to have been settled long before began to come in on them, that suspicion awoke. Even then no active measures were taken.

Aware that Mr. Ellesford had been apprised of the state of affairs, they received Banks's assurance that his intervention had canceled all pressing obligations, and that he was keeping actual supervision over the interests of the establishment. With this they had been contented until made aware of the deception practiced upon them by the disappearance of the managing partner, and subsequent examination betrayed that they were on the very verge of ruin.

A rumor of their insolvency had got abroad, and bills were pouring in from all quarters. Their paper was afloat to an immense amount, their accounts at the different banks fully drawn by the absconding member.

Total bankruptcy seemed before them.

The partners were holding a consultation in their private counting-room, to which, at Mr. Ellesford's request, Hastings had been admitted.

But no penetration or shrewdness could overcome the hard facts apparent. Could the immediate claims be met, the credit of the house sustained, they might bridge the crisis; but, most probably they would only succeed in staying off the evil day.

Hastings's situation was peculiar. As authorized agent of the Russell Brothers he was bound to prosecute their claim. Gratitude to Mr. Ellesford—perhaps a deeper emotion toward his daughter—and a full appreciation of the confidence reposed in him, made him shrink from the performance of his duty.

The latter consideration caused him to hazard a leniency seldom extended by the Crofton firm.

"My dear Hastings," replied Mr. Ellesford, "your claim is but one of a hundred, and must share equally with all the rest. Should the worst come our assets must, I think, cover to a great extent our indebtedness; and I pledge myself to relinquish my last dollar rather than suffer the dishonor of our signature."

Meanwhile in another part of the city a scene was enacting which bore direct reference upon the issue at stake.

An inner office, dark and cobwebby, where few visitors were permitted to penetrate. The outer or entrance room was large and light, with two or three clerks' desks ranged about the walls, and an intermediate apartment furnished with carpet and baize-covered chairs was the place where Jonathan Sharpe, lawyer and broker, was in the habit of receiving his general customers.

When a visitor was ushered beyond this into the office first mentioned, the clerks in the outer room wagged their heads and exchanged knowing smiles. It was always conceded by them that some deep game was on hand.

At this time Jonathan Sharpe was closeted close in his private sanctuary. His figure was thin and angular, with limbs loosely put together. His face was long and sallow, teeth projecting, forehead high and narrow and eyes light cold blue. His sandy hair, straight and sleek, extended in sparse side-whiskers on his cadaverous cheeks. His clothes were rusty black, worn at the seams, loose and ill-fitting. By no means a prepossessing man, and one whose forty years of life had recorded no unselfish deed to add to the philanthropy of the world.

His companion was of a different type, and in his erect bearing and pale, regular features we recognize an old acquaintance—Colonel Templeton. He was engaged in examining some legal-looking documents submitted for his inspection.

"You find them all correct, sir?" inquired Sharpe, with professional servility.

"Quite so! Now tell me how you managed all so admirably."

"Well, sir, you know he had lost heavily in the Pacific Branch Bond business; in fact was far beyond his own depth even there. Just then the Lucky Gulch mining stock began to show signs of life, and as his legal adviser, I suggested that here was a chance to regain his balance. Stock was low yet, but sure to rise rapidly. He bit greedily. I advised him to take the commission elsewhere—I was overcrowded."

Colonel Templeton's lip curled cynically, but he motioned for the other to proceed.

"Nothing would satisfy him but that I should undertake it, so I consented at last just to accommodate a liberal patron, you know. He had lifted the bank account before, and now raised twenty thousand dollars on the Company's paper."

"I bought at fifty per cent. below. Stock went up steadily. When it reached thirty below I consulted with him, but he had got the old fever on again and held fast. At twenty below I went to him again, told him I was called away for a day and offered again to sell. But he was determined to wait."

"Ten hours later I sold at par. Shares went up to four above and then wavered."

"I took a trip out of town—was detained two days. Found Banks waiting my return, raging like a madman. Lucky Gulch mining stock had fallen to seventy below, and still going down."

"He ordered me to sell at any sacrifice. In his excited state I thought it imprudent to let him know that I had disobeyed his previous injunction."

"He received ten thousand of his investment, and I added a morning paper with the list of packet ships marked. Sharpe, lawyer, is better off by another ten, and twenty thousand waits Colonel Templeton's command."

During his recital he had dropped his servile, fawning manner, adopting a confidential and boasting tone. The unreserved communication evinced that Colonel Templeton controlled the main-spring of this establishment.

"Well done, thou good and faithful servant," commended the other, satisfiedly.

There was some further communication, and when Colonel Templeton left the office of Jonathan Sharpe, he directed his steps immediately

toward the great mercantile establishment of Ellesford, Banks & Co.

A blundering cash boy directed him to the counting-room, and he came in upon them ere the partners had concluded their consultation. Hastings sprung up to prevent intrusion, but Mr. Ellesford rising bade him enter.

Templeton advanced, including them all in a general salutation, but addressing himself to the oldest member.

"Ellesford, is this true that I hear! Is it possible you are driven to the wall?"

"Then general rumor has caught it already," exclaimed Ellesford, bitterly.

"Not so! I got it from one who knows something of that scoundrel Banks's villainous proceedings, and I have come to offer you such assistance as lies in my power. I have already commissioned my agent to buy in all immediate claims he may find against you."

Mr. Ellesford's eyes dimmed and his voice faltered with grateful emotion.

"God bless you, Alan Templeton, for a true friend," he cried, clasping his hand warmly.

CHAPTER XI

NELLY KENT tottered rather than walked over the frozen road. This unexpected encounter had aroused conflicting memories which closed down around her, shutting out all of her present monotonous existence. Bitter memories they were, and a fierce passion raged within her breast.

Her step grew firmer and more even, but her eyes burned still with that inward fire. Her face, dropping its passive mask, was transformed so completely that those who had seen her shortly before would scarcely have recognized her as the same. Her fingers closed involuntarily over the rosary she still clutched and the beads crushed within her grasp. She shook them from her open hand, but the trivial incident had brought a new train of reflection.

"Revenge might destroy, but it can not restore," she muttered. "There is nothing left for me—nothing!"

She was nearing the strip of woodland skirting the road before Juana's cabin. A squirrel frolicking amid the branches peered down at her with bright, curious eyes. A partridge separated from its covey fluttered up from among the deadened leaves. But she noted neither, nor did a shadow flitting from clump to clump of tree and bush attract her more.

The air was cut with a whizzing sound and a missile thrown by an unseen hand fell at her feet. It startled her and she hurriedly scanned the surrounding prospect. There was no one to be seen. The stone defined in a bare pathway was wrapped with a strip of something white. Stopping, she detached a slip of paper, written in a straggling but not an uncultivated hand:

"If you would hear of one you think dead come alone to the Cross-lot stile at dusk. Let no one see this. ONE WHO KNOWS YOU."

Nelly pondered over it. But no gleam of light came to relieve her perplexity, or reveal its authorship. She thrust it into her bosom with the precious trinket and pursued her course. The squirrel in the limbs above rattled down a shower of chipped bark, and she started as though expecting some further revelation. None came and she hurried on.

Juana received her silently. A bright fire blazed upon the earth, the kettle swinging above it sung merrily. An odorous beverage steamed upon the hob. Everything had been made bright and cheerful for her return.

The old woman undid her wrapping, observing with anxious eye the troubled, preoccupied look she wore.

"I knew it would be so," she muttered, hanging the cloak on a wooden peg in the further corner. "I knew she could not go there and come back the same. I only wonder 'tis not worse."

Nelly looked round at her presently.

"I saw her, Juana—that woman!"

"Did you see nothing worse?" Juana questioned, with suppressed eagerness.

"What could be worse?" Nelly's eyes caught the lurid glow again. "I thought my heart was steeled and dead, but both my love and my hate have come back to me to-day."

Juana's skinny hands clutched each other in painful gripe, but she only waited and watched in silence.

Nelly's face was working convulsively, but she turned to the cheerful blaze and with a great effort calmed herself again.

"Is she here? Why did you not tell me?" she asked, her voice lulled to weary monotony.

"Who? Where?" Juana inquired, with a va-

cant expression as though trying in vain to comprehend the question.

"You know—the woman!"

"Was she—was she in the flesh?" the old woman asked, in an awesome whisper.

The other looked at her fixedly for a moment.

"Come here, my good Juana," she said. "You have not shared the deception practiced upon others—you do not believe me crazed? I may have been mad once; I think I must have been, but you know I am sane now. Did you think I was speaking of illusions?"

"I thought she would see it as it was that night," Juana muttered, but she said aloud, humbly:

"Tell me!"

"I met her upon the road. She was in a carriage, but leaned forward and looked me in the face, then fainted as she did once before," shudderingly.

"She remembers it and can speak calmly," Juana groaned; in her spirit. "Mrs. Templeton! They are at The Firs," she replied. "She seldom goes out. I thought you need never meet her."

"I pray that I may never again. Oh, I pray that I never may," Nelly cried out, her forced composure giving way, and breaking into a passion of strong sobs.

The old woman soothed and patted her as she would have done a little child, and when the paroxysm had passed led her into the inner room and persuaded her to lie down upon the couch. Nelly, weakened by her recent agitation, obeyed. Juana brought her a hot drink and in a few moments more she slept peacefully.

It was growing dusk when she awoke.

Her uninjured hand, which had clasped the locket while she slept, came in contact with the slip of paper she had concealed with it. She strained her eyes in the twilight to again read the mysterious words.

A lethargic feeling possessed her, an activity which was the natural reaction of over-strained nerves. She shook it off, however. The scrawl had gained new import to her which was not hope, but rather a wild desire, an expectation of finding it through this means.

She crept to the door which was ajar and listened. Juana was crooning a monotonous refrain. The fire had burned down to a bed of dull coals, and over these the old woman was crouching, her weird figure defined in the reddish glow, absorbed in herself to the exclusion of any thing which might occur about her.

Nelly drew herself silently over the floor, reached the long cloak from its peg and gained the door. The latch lifted noiselessly; she flitted over the threshold and away into the dim gloaming.

An hour later Juana listened at the door of the inner room. Perfect silence reigned.

"She'll want no more to-night," she muttered, satisfiedly. "It's best so, best so."

Then she spread out her own bed on the kitchen hearth, and was soon lost in the unconsciousness of profound slumber.

It was broad day when she was astir again. She added fuel and blew up the coals smothered in their blanket of gray ashes until they threw out a growing, sparkling flame. Then she tidied the outer room and went about preparing the morning meal, listening now and then for sounds of wakefulness from the other chamber.

None came. The old woman muttered to herself, and went about quietly, fearful of disturbing the sleeper. The sun mounted higher and higher in the sky.

"Strange," repeated Juana. "She seldom sleeps so late."

Then she rapped softly on the door of the inner room. It swung back beneath her touch, and with a thrill of apprehension she stepped within. The bed was disturbed but not occupied. The paraphernalia of the chamber remained in the exact order it had presented the previous day, but Nelly Kent was not there.

The hours passed, and she did not appear. Juana, tortured with anxiety, racked her brain in vain to account for her absence. She searched the grounds, where Nelly was accustomed to walk, with like result. She had disappeared from the cabin suddenly as she had come.

The day wore on to mid-afternoon, and Juana could remain no longer inactive. She went first to the Grange, but the missing woman had not been there. Then she directed her steps toward The Firs, her face taking on the dogged, sullen expression it sometimes wore as she walked.

She knew better than to apply for admittance at the servants' door. She crouched behind some bushes at the front, and waited.

The opportunity she sought came soon.

Reginald came out alone, slamming the door after him, his step crunching heavily down the path, fairly brushing against the bushes which screened her.

She darted out of her concealment, up the broad steps, and into the hall, ere the slow-motioned servant whose duty it was to attend the door had appeared there. A rack, hung with out-door garments, furnished her a hiding-place. Footsteps approached, passed her, and the man turned the key in the massive lock of the entrance door.

Fairly within, Juana was at a loss how to proceed. Her object was to see Mrs. Templeton alone.

A light, mincing step came into the hall, and, peeping from her cover, she beheld a smart maid-servant bearing a small tray. The man, still loitering there, planted himself in the girl's way.

"Arrah, me honey, but it's toll ye'll be payin' for the passage-way, I take it!"

The girl tossed her head coquettishly, and stopped to parley. The brawny, impudent Irishman was a favorite with her class.

"Let me pass, Mr. Murphy," she said, in strong French accent. "The madame will wish her tea."

"Musha, thin, ye'll not be kapin' the madame waitin' for so shmall a matther, will ye, ma-vourneen?"

There was some further dispute, but it ended in the fellow snatching the kiss he coveted and the maid's brisk tongue scolded vigorously, as she slowly ascended the stair.

The man disappeared, and Juana cautiously followed the girl.

Mrs. Templeton was quite ill, and in her private chamber. She was lying back in a velvet easy-chair, her dead-white cashmere wrapper scarcely more colorless than her wan face.

She sent away the maid, but the tray of dainty edibles stood by untouched.

She started nervously as the door unclosed again, and spoke without turning her head.

"What is it, Felice?"

The intruder advanced without making reply, and Mrs. Templeton, looking around wearily, confronted—not Felice, but Juana. A frightened cry rose to her lips, but the woman stilled her with a gesture.

"Hush!" she said. "I have come for no harm. Where is my mistress?—tell me that! What have you done with her?"

Mrs. Templeton regarded her wonderingly.

"How should I know?" she asked.

"You met her yesterday—she told me so. This morning she was gone. Has she not been here to you?"

The lady's eyes distended with some fearful agony.

"Was that your mistress?" she whispered.

"Ay, that was my mistress! I have changed since your bonny ladyship saw me at the Grange," she added, bitterly.

Mrs. Templeton shrunk back, as though struck with a sudden blow.

"Let it go," continued Juana. "Only tell me what I came to learn."

"I know nothing of her. She has not been here."

The old woman faced her angrily.

"Don't seek to deceive me," she cried out. "No matter what she came for, she must have been here."

"As God is my witness, I have not seen her—I have told you the truth," declared the other, and her words carried conviction to the heart of the listener.

"Then may the Virgin protect her!" said Juana solemnly. "She must indeed have gone mad at last! Woman, it is all your work! Think of it, and rejoice if you can."

Mrs. Templeton cried out sharply.

"Oh, Juana, Juana! You do me wrong! She did injustice to a noble heart, and still heaps it upon a sainted memory."

Juana looked down upon her with stern unbelief.

"Believe me! He was true to her always, as truth itself. I would have told her then, but I was weak and ill, and her anger frightened me. Do you tell her for me, that his thought never swerved a hair's breadth from his devotion to her. Tell her, if you would give a ray of peace to a miserable, tortured woman!"

"Swear it!"

"I swear it, by all that I hold dear or sacred!"

"And if it be so, I will never tell her. Cruel, cruel! It would but heap burning coals upon her head!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE Washington firm breathed freely again. Ruin had at last been averted. They had no doubt that, with the leniency Colonel Templeton would surely exercise, they would recover their tottering foothold.

The panic had been productive of serious reflection in the mind of Mr. Ellesford, apart from the intense anxiety he experienced upon the immediate result. These years of absence from the actual struggle of business had unfitted him for again coping with its complications successfully as he had once done. He determined, soon as the establishment should be fairly on its feet again, to withdraw from it entirely, and devote his remaining years to the quiet enjoyment of domestic comfort, untrammelled by aught of other interest.

Hastings had proved to him of invaluable aid. The young man's clear insight and indubitable perseverance had done much toward unraveling the knotted skein of mingled sophistries and facts which Banks had built up as an intrenchment against the discovery of his embezzlements.

The absconding partner had been traced, by an obscure route, on which he had turned and doubled, until he was, with difficulty, followed by the law's sleuth-hounds, to a seaport in a neighboring State, where all trace of him was lost. It was supposed that he had escaped to Europe, and there the pursuit ended.

Hastings now found himself fully able to resume his journey, and the business so long suspended. But first he went back with Mr. Ellesford to the Grange, having chosen a terminus bringing it within his direct course.

Only a single day's interval, and then he should leave the gray old Maryland homestead which had given him a nearer glimpse of earthly paradise than he had known before.

Adria was out on her favorite walk, commanding an unobstructed view of the bay, rolling dark now beneath the dull winter sky.

She knew of Hastings's near departure, and fully realized the precious value of every intervening moment while she could yet hear the tones that had awakened all her dormant wealth of woman's love, meet the earnest glances which sought hers ever with tender persistency.

Yet, with woman's inconsistency, she had fled away from the warmth and the brightness within, rendered doubly alluring by his presence, out here beneath the cold gray sky, with the raw wind sweeping in over the water, to get a foretaste of the loneliness and pain the coming days would bring her. She knew herself, and knew her love, but, feeling him worthy of it, deemed herself ennobled by the purity of her affection, even should it never be acknowledged save to her own heart.

There Hastings found her. He had caught a glimpse of her figure speeding across the bare roadway, and followed, knowing it to be his last chance of having her to himself, alone.

They spoke of incidental things—of the quiet landscape, of the ships fluttering their pennons far out upon the bay—of his own departure.

"I shall miss the pleasant companionship of the past few weeks when I go out into the world again," he said.

"But you will return to your home and friends soon, and forget us all," she replied, with a tinge of reproach in her voice.

"I have no home and no friends," he said sadly. "At least, none to bind me with a single loving tie. If home is where the heart is, I shall leave it behind me, on this lovely Chesapeake shore."

"I can almost wish it so, that it may bring you back again," Adria returned, feeling it incumbent on her to say something, and scarcely noting her words.

"I shall come back if you bid me," he exclaimed, reading her face with earnest eyes.

Fearing that she had unconsciously committed herself, she blushed and stammered:

"Papa has taken a warm liking to you. He will always be pleased to have you come."

He saw her embarrassment and gained a confidence he had never before possessed, in witnessing it. Claspings her hands in both of his, he asked:

"But what does 'papa's daughter' say for herself? It is she who will prove my magnet."

She blushed painfully, endeavoring to disengage her hands.

"Adria, Adria! I love you—so wholly, so utterly, that it does not seem presumption to tell you of it. Now, can you bid me come again, Adria?"

Her hands ceased their fluttering and rested quietly in his. She turned her face to him peacefully content.

"Come back!" she said.

A step rustled over the crisped turf and Reginald Templeton passed them, lifting his hat with courtly ease. Out of their sight, his face took on a livid passion, and his white, even teeth ground together in bitter rage.

"Ay, the game is in your hands now," he muttered, "but luck will turn. I can afford to wait."

Hastings's exit in search of Adria left Mr. Ellesford alone. Valeria came to the door presently, starting a little when she saw him, and hesitating.

"Come in," he said, kindly.

So she advanced and stationed herself in a position where his eyes, wandering ever and anon from the paper he held, must rest upon her.

She was slightly pale, and wore a wearied, listless expression. Her full proportions were well defined against the dark background of the great chair she had chosen. Her large, fair hands were clasped idly in her lap, her eyes gazing straight before her with preoccupied, intent look.

She would have made a good actress. Her postures, her expressions, were all studied with reference to effect; and this attitude had been conned by her before the long mirror in her own chamber. But Mr. Ellesford could in no way be aware of this.

Glancing at her now and then, he thought what a model of perfect womanhood she was. From that he fell to studying her face, and grew keenly observant of the wearied, sorrowful expression she wore. Her eyes brimmed full of sudden moisture, and two great crystal drops hung upon her fringing lashes. He threw aside his screening paper with real alarm.

"My dear Miss Walton, what has occurred to give you pain? Are you unhappy here?"

She started, and brushed aside the potent tears.

"Pardon me. I am foolish, weak; but, believe me, I did not mean to indulge in obtrusive sorrow."

"Then you have a grief? Can we do nothing to alleviate it? Both Adria and I are most anxious to make your position here agreeable to you."

"You are very kind," she replied, constrainedly.

He regarded her closely.

"Certainly my daughter has done nothing to cause you pain?"

"Oh, no, no! It is but my own folly. You would despise me were I to tell you."

"Confide in me, Valeria. Let me show you how anxious I am to promote your happiness."

"Oh, thank you for the kind interest you have displayed, and thank you again for receiving me so readily here in your household. I see now I was wrong in wishing to come. I thought I would find a refuge where I would be content, and your many kindnesses reproach me for yet remaining unsatisfied. But," her voice faltered brokenly, "it all serves to recall a time when those lived who loved me, and whom I loved. I see you lavish your affection upon your daughter, and think of the dear father who held me the idol of his heart. I feel myself so lonely—so desolate—"

Here she broke down with a sob, burying her face in a snowy mist of cambric and lace. Mr. Ellesford was much distressed.

"Oh, pray, don't," he said, in his awkward man-fashion, endeavoring to soothe her grief. "My dear Valeria, what can I do for you—how can I assure you that we regard you as very dear to us? I am sure Adria loves you as a sister. Oh, that she was here now," he concluded, in an undertone.

Miss Walton grew more composed. She understood the effects of woman's tears, but would not risk a too copious flow to the detriment of her beautiful eyes. Inflamed lids and swollen nose would not aid her cause.

"Adria is very, very kind," she answered, sadly. "But she does not understand my nature; she gives me none of her warm sympathy. She deems me cold, unfeeling, and her injustice chills me. I long so for love and tenderness."

Here she had recourse again to her handkerchief.

This was displaying a new phase of Miss Walton's disposition, but he did not stop to think of that.

"I am surprised—pained," he began, letting his hand drop on her brown braids. She put up a soft palm touching it, and thanked him with tearful glance. Her loveliness and her distress were fast folding him in the glamour she was striving to throw around him.

"Valeria, tell me, how can I comfort you?"

Can my love, my service, be ought to you?"

As though actuated by sudden impulse, she caught his hand and carried it to her lips, then dropped it with a vivid lightening of color on cheek and brow. He was fairly intoxicated now with the excitement of revelation which this action gave him.

"Valeria, my darling! My peerless queen of beauty!" he cried, catching her to him. "Is it true, my own?"

Valeria's tears were chased away by triumphant smiles, and there and then she secured her unsuspecting victim with vows exchanged.

"But, Adria!—what will she say?" she questioned, presently, with an air of timidity.

A pang of remorse struck him, but it was too late now for such consideration.

"Adria will rejoice in my happiness," he replied. "Tell me again, Valeria, that you are perfectly content."

"More than content," she said. At the moment, through the plate-glass window, she caught sight of Reginald Templeton's stalwart form advancing up the pathway. A bitter, yearning pain shot through her heart. She realized how empty were the words she uttered, and shrank beneath his touch when the old man's lips pressed her forehead. He thought it woman's modesty.

That same day Kenneth sought an interview with Mr. Ellesford, and in straightforward, manly way told him the story of his love and ambition.

"I am a poor man now," he said, "but the knowledge of Adria's love will strengthen me to overcome opposing circumstances. I shall not claim her until I can offer a firm support, and a station not wholly removed from the sphere in which she now moves. She is willing to wait. Will you not assure us of your consent, Mr. Ellesford?"

The elder man might not have acceded so readily had it not been for the bond he had so lately assumed. As it was he did not refuse his favor.

"I must stipulate that there be no binding engagement," he said. "you are both young and may change. You going into the world, will be tried in a thousand ways; at best you have a hard, perhaps tedious battle before you. It would be ungenerous to confine my daughter to a far-off possibility. Leave her free, but, if you both prove constant, I will gladly welcome you as my son when you are able to claim her."

The young lovers were fully satisfied with this, and the future unrolled itself a hopeful scroll before them.

What a mercy that the bright moments of our lives are not overshadowed by the knowledge of events to come.

CHAPTER XIII.

HASTINGS left the Grange full of hopeful anticipation. It would be months perhaps before he could return, but he had a high aim now to strive for, and this time of separation was rendered more endurable since it was given him as so much opportunity to mount toward the level he had determined to attain. Though Mr. Ellesford had objected to a formal betrothal between the lovers, he put forward no interdiction or limit to their communications.

And Adria saw him depart firm in her faith in his ability to accomplish the task before him, already spanning the mystic future with bright hopes of the time when they should walk hand in hand, with no fear of parting until death's severance.

Mr. Ellesford took an early opportunity to inform her of the relation now existing between himself and Valeria. He had dreaded the effect of the revelation. He was haunted by a dim consciousness that he was doing his adopted daughter some wrong in thus taking another love to his heart.

Adria was taken completely unawares. She had never anticipated such a result. The time had been so short since Valeria's introduction to the Grange, the discrepancy of ages was so great, and more than either, the supposition had never entered her mind during all the years since her mother's death that any other woman could ever usurp that vacant place. She was surprised and grieved, and under the influence of the first shock could not but betray herself.

"Oh, papa!" she cried, reproachfully, "how can you?"

His own conscience might venture to doubt the wisdom of his resolution, but he would not brook resentment from another—not even from Adria.

"My daughter forgets that she herself is an-

icipating a time when she shall leave me. Is it so strange that I should not wish to be alone and lonely in my old age?"

"Papa, dear, you know that I will never leave you. It is all so different. Valeria does not love you, papa; she never will care for you as I do."

"Really, Adria," he said, coldly, as he seldom spoke to her, "I can understand that this announcement was unlooked for by you, but I cannot permit you to impute any but loving motives to my future wife. You shall be provided for all the same."

"Oh, papa!" she cried, again, hurt that he should so misconstrue her words. "Indeed—indeed, I am not so selfish. I was thinking only of you."

"Then you will not envy me that which will add to my happiness, my daughter?"

"Oh, no, no! Not if it will make you truly happier."

He kissed her and sent her away, glad to have the interview over.

She went immediately to Valeria's room, with a vague hope which she did not stop to analyze. A hope like one striving to be awakened from a tantalizing dream, or finding it true, that the other might have accepted the confiding old man from truly worthy motives.

Valeria was expecting her. She was aware of the interview and its purpose. She remained apparently unconscious awaiting the other's tactics. Adria was too thoroughly in earnest to approach her subject warily.

"You are going to marry papa?" she asked.

"He has told you, then?" calmly. "Yes!"

"Why?"

Valeria had not expected this straight-forward questioning. Woman of the world as she was, it disconcerted her. With the girl's clear eye upon her she could not declare that it was for love, much as she might wish to preserve that illusion.

"Why?" she repeated. "Because—because he asked me."

Then came the thought, she had virtually gained her object. Was it worth her while baffling the judgment which was trying her? It could make no difference in the end attained.

She turned her fair face squarely within Adria's view, and met her gaze with calm, cold eyes. Her lips curled with a smile half-mocking, half-triumphant.

"Selfish and cruel!" declared Adria, her hope gone. "May God deal with you, Valeria Walton, as you do by him."

Preparations were immediately commenced for the marriage. It was Mr. Ellesford's wish that it should be consummated at an early date and in a strictly private manner. Much as Valeria loved display she made no demur. Perhaps she consoled herself with the reflection that when she was fairly installed mistress of the Grange, she would control both the liberty and means of rendering her life gay as she could desire.

The second week after his departure, Adria received a long letter from Kenneth. He was quite strong now and fortune was already smiling upon him. He had received a large order for the Russell prints, and been successful in presenting an old claim.

"I take it as a happy omen," he wrote. "Knowing that you are praying me 'God-speed,' I can not but prosper. I am more than contented, and gladly hopeful with my dear reward set in the future."

The words brought sweet solace to Adria, and in them she forgot her anxiety on her father's account.

Reginald Templeton came regularly as of old to the Grange. He was quietly dropping into his lover-like ways again, but Adria was too absorbed in herself and others to note this.

He was working with a purpose now, fixed as his unrelenting nature. He felt, too, the value of this time, and the necessity for striking an immediate blow.

He startled her one day by bursting out with the full tempest of his pent-up passion. He had not that cool control over himself, to plot and to carry into effect, keeping his own emotions out of sight, and thus insuring greater success.

She was all alone at the Grange.

Valeria had gone to the city for a couple of days to oversee some details of the trousseau she was having prepared, notwithstanding the proposed privacy of the coming ceremony. And Mr. Ellesford had embraced the occasion to personally inspect the condition of the firm and its prospect of braving through.

Adria was at the piano softly accompanying herself to an old love song. Some happy reflection had brought a brightened glow to her cheeks, a luminous expression to her eyes.

Reginald, letting himself in quietly as was his wont, stood regarding her while she remained unaware of his presence. Her hands fell away from the keys and she turned to face his pleading, passionate gaze.

"Adria, pity me! I feel all the love for which

'I'd lay me down and die.'

for your sweet sake. But, oh! my love, I can not live without you! It will drive me mad, or worse, unless I can know that I have some hope. I will wait; if you only will not turn your heart away from me I will yet win your love. My love, my darling, do not drive me to sinful despair!"

He was kneeling at her feet, imprisoning her hands in a clasp that almost made her scream with pain.

"Reginald, this is worse than folly. I beseech you, do not utter another word. Your persistency can only succeed in ending our friendship."

"Listen to me, Adria. You, and you only, can save me from desperation. I love you as no other man can or will. Don't turn against me and I will win you fairly, but by fair means or foul I will have you yet. You don't know how a man can make any woman love him, Adria! Oh, my darling! give me some assurance, ever so little, and I shall be so patient and so faithful that yourself shall deem me worthy of you at last."

"If you love me as you say, be generous and leave me. A brave spirit never persecutes a helpless woman."

He sprang to his feet, a quick flush mantling his cheeks.

"Adria, once more, will you give me a hope of some time honorably claiming you? Reflect, before you answer me. You have seen the depth of my love. Take care that you don't tempt my hate. You don't know of what I am capable for, either good or ill. Do you treat me tenderly, have pity for me, and I will make myself a better man than I ever have been. Tell me that you will, Adria, if you would save yourself and me from sorrow, if no worse."

She shuddered beneath his gaze. His handsome face illuminated with ardent love must have appealed to her irresistibly had she not worn the shield of another's wielding. Though his face was full of pleading, his lip was set in a hard curve, betraying his immovable resolve.

"What can I say or do?" she asked him. "I can never love you, Reginald Templeton. Go away from me. Never speak to me again unless you can forget all of this. I was lenient with you before, but you have forfeited the confidence I placed in you. Let me retain at least my respect for you. Show yourself a true man; leave me to myself and my own peace."

"Which means your own love?" he asked, his passion suddenly leaving him cold and calm.

She met his gaze unflinchingly. Her love acknowledged and returned, she would have felt no false shame in proclaiming it, to the world had there been need.

"Yes," she replied. "You know now, how impossible it is that you can ever be to me more than a friend—not that, if you persist in this mad course."

"And I swear that no other man shall ever claim you. You have driven me to it. Let the consequences rest with you alone. Some time you may kneel to me for mercy and for love as I have this day plead with you. When that time comes I will know whether I love or hate you most. I can't tell which now, but either will work to the same end."

He left her then, touching his hat with courtly grace as he passed the window a moment later; but the quiet white rage upon his face frightened her more than all his threatening words had done.

CHAPTER XIV.

COLONEL TEMPLETON and his son again confronted each other in the bright, pleasant brary.

They seemed for the moment to have exchanged dispositions. The latter, calm and cold, with no emotion perceptibly stamped upon his pale features; the former pacing the room restlessly in a petulant anger he seldom displayed.

"You have acted like a fool," he said. "Why couldn't you be content to follow my instructions? You have set the girl against you now, lost a vantage-ground you will not easily regain."

"I beg your pardon. I thoroughly understand my own footing, and am now prepared

to hesitate at no means to forward my designs. I have kept my part of our agreement by giving you the exact position, and soliciting your further aid. With or without it I shall accomplish my aim."

Colonel Templeton was not wishing to arouse this independent spirit.

"Of course I shall render my assistance to the uttermost since my promise is given to that effect," he hastened to say. "But you must not upset my plans by your rash hot-headedness. Give me a little time and I will warrant you if not a willing, at least a submissive bride."

Reginald looked at him keenly.

"You have some deeper interest at stake than the mere furtherance of this alliance," he said.

The father turned upon him sharply, and with evident annoyance.

"Is it not enough that I have espoused your cause?" he demanded. "Our motives, if not identical, will pull together."

Turning to the door abruptly he imagined he heard the rustle of garments, but a hasty survey of the adjoining apartment revealed no one.

Reginald, striding out through the wide hallway, felt a clinging grasp upon his arm, saw a white, agonized face lifted to his. It was his mother. She drew him hastily into the empty morning room, closing and locking the door behind them.

"I overheard all, accidentally, I beg you to believe," she said, speaking rapidly. "Oh, my son, give up your purpose. Promise me that you will never seek to ally yourself with an Ellesford!"

"You are nervous, mother," he said, kindly, for whatever his faults may have been he was universally tender with her. "You cannot expect to keep your boy always, you know."

"Reginald, I implore you. Go where you will, wed any except one connected with that house. There is a gulf there you must not attempt to cross. If you love Adria Ellesford, crush the feeling from your heart if you would not have it bring retribution on you who are yet innocent. If you covet the broad possessions she will inherit, for the love of Heaven put such temptation from you. Better for you to wander a beggar through the land than to touch a farthing from that source."

"Mother, dear, we will not talk of it now! If you overheard our conversation you heard my determination also. You know that a Templeton never swerves from his purpose."

She shuddered visibly.

"Oh, my son, listen! See, I will kneel to you, pray to you, only give up all thought of her."

"Never, while I live!"

Her voice sunk to a hoarse whisper.

"Reginald! Reginald! There is a crime which has raised a barrier between you. A deadly sin which has made my life a curse. Do not, by your own act, bring down the brand upon you!"

"You speak enigmas, mother," he said, chillingly. "I do not attempt to penetrate your meaning. But if Hades itself stood between her and me, I would not relinquish my aim."

Colonel Templeton was steadily occupied all that morning. In the afternoon he brought out the Sultan, and mounting, rode slowly to the Grange.

Mr. Ellesford had returned and was at liberty. He met his visitor cordially, as a man who had a warm claim upon his gratitude.

"Let me order your horse put away, and do you dine with us," he insisted. But Colonel Templeton declined.

"No," he said. "I have called on business purely. A rather delicate matter, I admit, but still with us a business affair."

Mr. Ellesford looked with inquiry, and awaited further development. The other continued, indicating the view from the room where they sat.

"Your grounds cover a slope which can be surpassed for both beauty and fertility nowhere in Maryland."

The other bowed with gratified delight. He was proud of his ancestral estate.

"And The Firs is not a contemptible piece of property?"

"On the contrary it is very fine. You should congratulate yourself on its possession."

"What would you say to joining the two?"

Mr. Ellesford was surprised and puzzled. The other explained.

"My son has plunged headlong into a romantic passion for your daughter. We who have passed the heyday of youth can afford to laugh at youthful folly, which in this case I think tends wisely. The advantageous results of

such an alliance are obvious. For my part I strongly favor the move and have come to solicit your concurrence."

"My dear Templeton, nothing would give me greater pleasure were it possible. Unfortunately my daughter is already compromised."

"Irrevocably?"

Mr. Ellesford explained the circumstance, and condition.

"At most, a girlish partiality. I am more inclined to think it the result of pique. Adria certainly encouraged my son's attentions, but he unfortunately provoked her displeasure. No doubt she is even now repenting the rupture between them."

"I cannot think you are right. Adria is not apt to act hastily. I own frankly that I should be best pleased with the consummation you propose, but the decision does not rest with me. She is yet free to act at her own discretion. If your son can succeed in winning her you may be assured of my consent."

"And otherwise?"

"I have already assured Hastings of my approval if they both remain constant."

Colonel Templeton leaned toward him, speaking in a confidential tone.

"You can exercise your authority toward inducing her to accept Reginald."

The other drew back rather stiffly.

"Colonel Templeton, I consider the marital relation of too great importance to be unwillingly enforced. My daughter's choice shall be mine."

Colonel Templeton's lip curled scornfully.

"There may be even more important considerations in this case. Will you be kind enough to examine this?"

He drew a document from his pocket. It was addressed to Jonathan Sharpe, and contained explicit directions to press the immediate payment of claims, amounting to the aggregate of fifty thousand dollars, against the firm of Ellesford & Co.

"You have no chance of meeting it," he said, coldly, "and the slightest alarm will bring as much more upon you from other sources."

Mr. Ellesford returned the paper, pale to the lips.

"It will bring ruin upon us. It might better have come before."

"Ellesford & Co. take advantage of the bankrupt code," rehearsed the other, tauntingly.

"Colonel Templeton, you mistake me. I have a last resource to preserve our name from dishonor."

"You mean that you would first incumber the estate?"

"I would first sell the last inch of the Ellesford grounds!"

Colonel Templeton's face grew cruelly triumphant.

"If you were called upon to deliver up your stewardship?" he asked. "On what terms did you inherit the family wealth?"

Mr. Ellesford looked at him, not comprehending.

"Was it not in consideration of Hugh Ellesford's death without issue?"

"It was, certainly!"

"Unfortunately he left a son. I see you are surprised. You deemed him an unmarried man. That only goes to prove how well he kept his secret from his nearest relative and the world."

Joseph Ellesford was first amazed, then incredulous.

"It cannot be," he declared.

"I can prove it beyond doubt. Do you realize the consequences should it be done, and the true heir produced?"

His confident tone carried conviction that his assertion was not made idly. Mr. Ellesford sunk back overcome by the prospect the future presented to him should this be true. Colonel Templeton regarded him with calm satisfaction. He knew his man, knew the easy nature which, shrinking from anything tainting of worldly dishonor, might be influenced by a stronger will to a complicity, reprehensible in itself, but which would result apparently to his own benefit and do no one a suspected ill.

"Perhaps you would prefer to remain in blissful ignorance," resumed Templeton, dropping his voice again to that confidential tone. "I have come here to-day as your friend, Ellesford. I have no desire to disturb your security. What I have made known need never go further; you and I should be able to keep the secret. Of one thing I can assure you. The real heir, your brother's son, has no notion of his station. He has been reared in a totally different sphere, and believes he belongs there. Co-operate with me and you remain safe; go against me, and find yourself a beggared and dishonored man."

Mr. Ellesford only stared at him, dumbly despairing.

"Give your daughter to my son in marriage, and all will be well. She will not refuse, knowing that your prosperity or ruin hangs upon her word."

The other put out his hands with a helpless, imploring gesture.

"Give me time. I am unnerved—I cannot think. Go away. Let me think!"

Colonel Templeton drew out his watch.

"In a half-hour the mail leaves for Washington. I give you ten minutes in which to decide, whether or no you will act with me. If not, Sharpe will receive his instructions by morning, and other consequences will follow."

Mr. Ellesford bowed his head upon his hands, his face livid and working convulsively. On the one hand was ruin, poverty, and the dishonor of his name; on the other, a wrong which was scarcely a wrong when the one against whom it was committed was none the worse for it.

Adria, daintily reared and fondly cared for, rose before him. Then he seemed to see her haggard and worn, dragging out her bright young life in hopeless toil, suffering even for the common necessities of existence. Could he doom her to such a fate?

Strange that he should think only of her—that he should wholly forget both himself and his bride that was to be. But for the time Valeria was blotted from his memory completely as if she had never been.

"Five minutes!" announced Colonel Templeton. "Be quick, my friend!"

CHAPTER XV.

CROSS-LOT STILE was a place scrupulously avoided by the simple country folk. Between it and the highway lay some barren clayey fields, and a deserted old graveyard, which, but for a few half-concealed mossy stones had lost all trace to denote the character of the place. Beyond, a stretch of marsh-land, bridged by a ruinous old causeway, possibly laid and used by those denizens of that Silent City, now faded from the memory of their kind ere their work had fallen into complete decay.

Nelly Kent sped through the gathering darkness across the open, miry fields, struck by a chill which was not quite terror, upheld by something which was hardly hope.

Letting herself with difficulty in through the narrow gate, now rusted from its hinges and upheld in its place by a growth of rank shrubs, she groped her way cautiously across the yard where the shadows lay thickest. Something stirred in the coarse grass at her feet, and whirled away with an unearthly scream. It was only a night-bird frightened from its cover, but it startled her so that she caught her breath and sat down on a fallen slab to recover from a fit of violent trembling.

"What have such as I to do with fear?" she muttered, half-audibly, rising up again. "Nothing to gain and nothing to lose. Life has no charms and death no terrors. Let come what will it can matter naught to me."

For how long should she vaunt the idle boast?

There was another stir in the grass near her, but she was not frightened now. She walked more steadily across the darker space until she reached the stile.

She strained her eyes through the shadow but could see no one. She listened, the silence remained unbroken. A movement caught her eye. It was only a bush swaying in the breeze. She sighed, turning to depart, then paused again a moment ere she should put an end to the chance which had brought her there.

There was no stir, no sound, but she was caught suddenly from behind in the gripe of strong arms. Her large cloak was thrown as a muffler over her face. She was lifted and borne away, almost without a struggle, so unexpected was the attack.

She tried to scream but her voice was smothered in the close covering. She endeavored to free herself, but she was weak yet from her over-excitement of the morning, and she found herself pinioned immovably in the close grasp. With the effort she fainted dead away in the arms of her captor. Bearing her unconscious weight he strode straight on over the craggy old causeway, where now and then missing ties and rotten string-pieces plunged him ankle-deep into tenacious mire.

On the other side was a rocky tract, and beyond a brawling little river, which in times of drought was scarcely more than a string of

shallow pools connected by a thread of running water. But in stormy seasons, or in the spring when the snow melting contributed to its contents, it swelled into stormy, active passion, sweeping every obstacle that came in its way before it with irresistible force.

On the bank of this stood a mill, shattered now and long deserted. The builder, a half-crazed enthusiast, had selected the site against the urgent advice of those knowing the locality. But he soon had occasion to repent his obstinacy.

The summer drought left him without sufficient power to turn the great wheel, and the autumn storms coming with unusual severity, the river broke bounds, and flooding the country about, rose well up in the second story of the mill, tearing the machinery from its place, and leaving the building wrecked and useless.

The land to which it belonged had once been an independent portion, which stretched in a long, narrow strip back of the Ellesford domain, but some years before had been annexed to the Templeton property.

It was toward the ruinous old mill that the man made his way.

When Nelly awoke to consciousness again she found herself in impenetrable darkness. She was lying on a rude straw pallet, and stretching out her hand it came in contact with a partition of rough boards. She endeavored to rise but her head was confused and dizzy, so she sunk back, awaiting in a half-torpid state the coming of light.

She could hear the murmur of running water, and the sound lulled her into a doze by-and-by. When she awoke again it was broad day, and the bright sunlight streamed in through cracks and chinks high up in the wall of her prison.

A queer little room it seemed to her, with no windows and a single narrow door which seemed to have been cut through the solid plank. It was, in fact, one of the great garbors in which the grain had been stored, and was celled over with movable, rough boards, but through the wide interstices she could catch a glimpse of the shattered roof and of the blue sky far beyond.

She wondered vaguely how she had come there and for what purpose. Then the removal of bolts fully aroused her. She sat upright as the narrow door swung outward, admitting the man she had momentarily seen once before in Juana's cabin.

He was no longer pallid and emaciated. As she regarded him some dim recognition floated through her mind, yet tantalizingly eluded the mental grasp she would have put upon it.

He spoke with a kind of native courtesy, displaying a set of even, milky teeth in an evil smile. Then she knew him.

"Pedro, it is you! Are you not satisfied yet? Will you follow me to the death?"

He smiled again complacently.

"I will follow the senora no more."

"Oh, my bright, sunny Italy," she murmured, softly. "That you should be brought back to me through such an agency."

He regarded her quietly.

"The senora, like my humbler self, has almost lost sight of the old titles."

"I am only Nelly Kent, now," she said.

"And I am Luke Peters."

"Why have you brought me here?" she asked.

"Was it you who threw the note?"

"Ay, and wrote it!"

"But I never thought you dead, whatever I might have hoped since you persecuted me so."

"It was not of myself I spoke."

"Of whom, then?"

"Think—guess! Which of those gone to the silent land could you wish for most?"

An intense pain swept over her face.

"Oh, not him," she moaned, to herself, "for he was false as they all are. Nor yet for my little sinless babe, to be and to suffer, perhaps to sin and then die."

Then she conquered herself and returned his eager, questioning gaze stolidly.

"Tell me your business and let me go," she said. "The sight of you wearies me."

He frowned, but persisted.

"The holiest love you ever knew—"

"Hush!" she cried, angrily. "What can you know of holy things? I would not have a tender memory recalled by you!"

His dark eyes glittered, and his hand clenched involuntarily, but a look of keen cunning replaced his temporary anger.

"Then you shall listen all the more. Let me tell you. Your little child—the brave boy who was your delight, where is he?"

"Dead," she answered, solemnly.

"You saw him in his coffin! You strewed his last pillow with immortelles, and shed sorrowing tears over his grave!"

She broke out with a moaning cry.

"Why do you torture me? Why mock me with the consolation that was never mine?"

He was moved by her agony.

"The boy did not die," he said.

She made as though she would have sprung at him just as Juana had done, then sunk back, moaning dumbly.

"Listen," he continued. "You could no longer keep him near you. He languished in the close confinement you were obliged to sustain. You sent him away with your faithful Juana, the nurse who had tended you in your infancy. You knew I was on your track, searching for you the wide world over, but you thought I would never discover your retreat."

"I might never have done so but that I stumbled across Juana and the boy in the Southern sea-shore village. I knew him by his resemblance to you. I watched my chance and stole him from her. 'Twas not done easily, for she was a faithful guardian, but I got him away from her at last."

"Then I sought her when she was frantic over his loss, and promised to restore him if she would guide me to you. She lied to me, told me you were dead, but I saw through the flimsy subterfuge. I kept the boy. She dared not tell you of his fate, or that I was on your track. She thought that she had eluded me when she went back and told you her story."

He checked himself suddenly, then resumed:

"I put the boy in safe hands where I knew you would never find him, and have seen him often since. What will you do, or what will you not do, for his restoration?"

"Oh, my child, my little child," she cried out, with a burst of softened, tender tears, such as she had not shed for long years. "Restore me to my boy and I can freely forgive you all."

"Nothing to gain, nothing to lose," he repeated. "I heard you in the old graveyard, and I said to myself, 'Before another day passes she will kneel to me and beg for that which I alone can give.'"

"And I do, I do," she sobbed, prostrating herself before him. "Pedro, oh, good Pedro, take me to my child!"

His eyes grew hard and glittering.

"On one condition only will you ever see your boy."

She caught her breath—she knew it before he spoke.

"You scorned me once, drove me from you, laughed that I should aspire to your love. I swore to be revenged, and I have imbittered your whole life. The fear of me hung over you always like a threatening cloud. I have the power now, and you will never see your boy again, unless you give me the hand you denied me scornfully then. I said I would follow you no more. Neither will I, for you shall never leave me again. Never again!"

She did not attempt to plead with him, but white and crushed, crept back to the pallet of straw.

"Then I shall never see my child. Never again! Better that he had truly died!"

CHAPTER XVI.

COLONEL TEMPLETON closed the hunting-case of his watch with a snap, returning it to his pocket. He rose, taking his hat in his hand.

"The time is up," he said. "Will you favor me with your decision?"

Mr. Ellesford raised his head with slow, painful emotion. He had aged ten years in as many minutes.

"To what would you drive me, Alan Templeton? I can not see my way clearly. Give me time—a week, a day!"

"Oh, well! I must hasten to reach the mail."

His hand was upon the latch, the door swung open beneath his touch. Adria flitted through the passage-way, humming a snatch of song. Templeton glanced over his shoulder.

"Better give your singing-bird a secure cage than to turn it helpless upon a world full of enemies. However, that is your affair!"

"Stop!" cried Mr. Ellesford. "Have you no pity in your heart?"

"Your decision! At best it is but a choice of evils."

"I can not doom my child to poverty and toil."

"You accept the alternative? You will use your authority to bring about this marriage?"

"If I must. My poor, poor Adria! It is for her sake only."

"You have acted wisely," commended Colonel Templeton. "But I can not see it as such a sacrifice. My son is not an ill match."

Mr. Ellesford was scarcely listening.

"I must ask you to press the subject at once."

continued the other. "Can I depend upon your doing so?"

"Why not? To-day if you wish. It will be over the sooner!"

"You are right." After a word or two more, he passed out.

Leaving the Grange, he proceeded in the direction of the bay, but ere long turned into a by-lane, grass-grown and seldom traversed. Beyond this, making a detour about the fields, he came out upon the bank of the noisy little river, and following its course southward, came to the mill.

The man, Luke Peters, came forward from the place to meet him.

"You have changed for the better," the gentleman remarked, carelessly. "Good feeding and secure shelter have thrived you."

"Ay, I'm in condition for job work again," the other returned, gruffly. "What's it the wind now, Colonel Templeton?"

"You are cynical, my friend. I have come to see after your well-doing."

Peters laughed sneeringly.

"Out with it," he said. "Ill deeds don't require delicate mouthing here."

A shade of vexation crossed Colonel Templeton's brow. He could not sound his tool in the manner he desired.

"It is no work," he said, "only a question. Where is the boy?"

"He'll not trouble you, Colonel Templeton."

"That is not answering. Hark! what is that?"

A wild wail was born upon the breeze.

"Only the wind," said the other, hastily. "It shrieks through the old shell like something human."

"I should say so," returned the other, dryly. "Very much like a woman. The wind plays queer pranks sometimes. But to the point. I ask you, where is the boy?"

"Where he'll trouble no one. Dead!" said Peters, sullenly.

"Mind what you say," declared Colonel Templeton, menacingly. "Remember that one end of a rope is about your neck, the other in my hand. I'm not apt to be lenient where any one plays me false. Now, have you lied to me?"

"Why should I? It's of no account to me," the man returned, dogged and scowling slightly, but meeting the other's gaze steadily enough.

"True. Well, lie low. I'll see that you get fresh supplies in a day or two."

Wheeling his horse shortly round, he rode away at a brisk canter.

"It's as well," he muttered to himself. "Could Joseph Ellesford know all, he would have little fear of my replacing the true heir, even did he live."

Luke Peters watched the receding form out of sight, and uttered a low, scornful laugh.

"Ay, go, my fine gentleman. But you should remember that others than you can plot and work."

Mr. Ellesford sat silently as he had been left. He tried to fix his mind upon the crisis thus brought home to him, but the alternatives seemed to stare at him out of a blank space in which he could find no foothold to grasp or analyze them.

Adria passing presently, looked in at the door.

"Are you ill, papa?"

"Ill? Yes—no. I am not quite well, I believe. Come here, my daughter."

She advanced, resting her hand upon his shoulder.

"You are pale and faint. What is it, dear?"

"What? Only ruin," he answered, with a sharp, unnatural laugh.

She looked at him with a shade of anxiety on her face. She thought him seriously unwell, slightly delirious, and placed her hand upon his forehead, expecting to find it fever-hot. It was clammily cold.

There was a flagon of wine on the sideboard. She silently filled a glass, holding it to his lips. The generous stimulus imparted brought him back to himself and the situation.

"I did not speak wildly," he said, meeting her glance. "Listen to me, Adria! Total ruin stares me in the face, and you alone can avert it. Will my daughter see me turned beggared upon the world when her act can save me?"

"What do you mean?—tell me plainly."

He took another draught of the wine. Then, collecting his faculties, explained briefly:

"You know I have had business difficulties. I can not enter into a detailed account. Colonel Templeton advanced money, bought up claims that were pending, got a hold upon me by which he can reduce me to the strait I have said. He leaves but one gate of escape."

Adria recoiled apprehensively.

"You guess what it is—that you shall marry"

his son. It is the only alternative, my daughter."

"Papa, is there no mistake? Surely, it can not be so bad! Your business, the great Ellesford estates, they can not all be at stake?"

"Every thing. I would not attempt to influence your choice were the chance less desperate."

"Then let it all go, papa! I have already given Reginald Templeton his final answer. It is worse than ungenerous of him to attempt coercing me through you."

"It is not the young man's doing. I do not know that he is even conscious of his father's intentions. He has sought you honorably and openly—he is in every way fitted to mate with the highest. You must accept him, my daughter!"

"Papa, have you forgotten Kenneth?"

He caught at Colonel Templeton's remark.

"A mere girlish fancy, Adria. You must crush it out. You have been a good girl always, you will not disobey me in this?"

"I must, father. In all else I shall do as you command, but, even for you, I will not prove false to my love."

"Ungrateful girl! Hear, then! It will bring not only beggary, but disgrace. Giving up everything, the roof over our heads, even the clothes upon our backs, I would yet be deeply involved. Go away now and think of it. I would have you comply willingly. Sacrifice yourself, if it be a sacrifice, but let it be done freely."

An expression of fear shot across the gray palor of her face.

"Papa," she whispered, "you have committed no crime from which this has resulted?"

Crime! Something in the word chilled him.

"No, no!" he said, petulantly. "Go away now, I wish to be alone. Come to me when you can say that you submit."

In her heart she knew that time would never come. There was that in her nature which would not brook unjust authority, and she said to herself that her womanhood should not be sacrificed even to keep him from sorrow and shame.

"We will bear it together," she thought, but she left him without a word.

She was confused by what she had heard. She could not understand how it had all come about. She half hoped it might yet prove a disordered fancy.

Throwing a shawl about her, she went out in the cold evening air. Within she felt limited, prescribed. Out here, with the cold sky far above and the wide expanse of earth and water before her, she could throw the cloud from her brain, and perhaps find a clew to lead her through the labyrinth of doubt.

There was the tramp of horses' feet upon the hard road, and Colonel Templeton reined in the Sultan by her side. She did not wait for him to speak.

"What is this you have been doing with papa, Colonel Templeton?"

"Ah, he has given you the situation?"

"He has been talking strangely."

"But truly, I don't doubt."

"He says he is a beggar unless I give my consent to wed your son."

"He has spoken correctly."

His cool tone brought the angry blood to her cheeks. She attempted no parley or conciliation. If he was firm in his purpose, she was no less so. She spoke without perceptible passion.

"Then, Colonel Templeton, I will say to you what I have not yet told him. Did not only his fortune and honor, but his life and mine depend upon my word, with my last breath would I refuse the alternative you offer."

She turned then, walking quietly away.

He looked after her with something akin to admiration.

"Plucky!" he ejaculated. "It will take decisive measures to bring her within bounds."

The evening wore along, but Mr. Ellesford remained leaning wearily back in his chair. At dinner-hour he excused himself on that oft-perverted plea of headache, and the servant bringing him a shaded lamp, at his request prevented intrusion. Adria went to him when it grew late.

"Papa, dear! you will make yourself actually sick. Go to bed, or let me stay with you."

He did not speak immediately, but presently asked:

"Are you going to obey me, Adria?"

"Oh, papa! I can not do that."

"Well, never mind, daughter! I only meant to try you. It was for your sake I did it, not mine. Good-night, dear!" dismissing her with a gesture.

She lingered, unwilling to leave him, but he again signified his desire that she should go.

"Would you like to have Valeria come, papa?" she asked hesitatingly. "You really should not remain alone!"

Valeria! He had not thought of her for hours.

"No," he said. "I am resting easily here, but I will retire soon. I think I shall sleep well."

She kissed him and stole away.

In the morning Joseph Ellesford sat there still, stark and stiff.

CHAPTER XVII.

APOPLEXY, the physicians declared. The Ellesfords had all been predisposed that way. So the late master of the Grange was laid beside those of his kin who had penetrated the dark mystery before him.

Wedding robes were laid aside for mourning garments. Could anything have effected an enduring bond between the two lonely women at the Grange, this grief should have done it. But they were drifting apart now, even away from the assumed cordiality between them.

A few months must be passed over briefly.

Joseph Ellesford, like many another man better or worse, had gone the way of the flesh, leaving undone an important act. He had made no will. True, during the last few hours of his life he believed he had rightfully nothing of which to make disposition; but he should have prepared for death's emergency long years before. He had always intended settling the full property upon Adria. Had he lived and consummated his marriage as proposed, Valeria would have inherited a life interest.

As it was she put forward her claim, and was duly acknowledged sole heir.

Of the remaining Ellesfords descended from the founder of the Grange, one branch had become entirely extinct. Another, prospering but illy on American soil, had shaken its dust from their feet and gone back to reclaim the debt-burdened patrimony and empty title, which, after lapse of a century, was left in the mother-country without representative.

So Valeria settled securely in her new position.

She took an early opportunity to impress Adria with their change of stations.

"Of course you will stay here, my dear," she said, graciously. "I will require a companion, and some one to direct the more onerous household charges. I don't think I could suit myself better." And on the spot she named a salary, by no means liberal, considering the duties she contrived should rest upon Adria's shoulders.

The latter felt the change keenly. Her pride which was not Ellesford, but of more independent class, would have urged her out into the world in preference to this almost menial service in the home where her wish had once been law. There was an obstacle in the way, however, one reared by her loyal, loving heart. She would take no decisive step until Kenneth's judgment should pass issue upon it. She temporarily accepted Valeria's ungenerous proposal, patronizingly as it had been given. In the same hour she indited a few tear-blotted lines to her lover.

"Poor papa is gone!" ran a paragraph of this missive. "I am penniless, and alone in the world except for you. Tell me what is best to be done, and I will obey you just as I expect to do in the future time when our hopes and interests shall be inseparably the same. I have full faith in the wisdom of whatever you shall direct, and await your reply, longing for sympathy from the only love left me now."

Kenneth was, she knew not where, moving from place to place, unknowing himself one day where his commission might lead him upon the morrow. So Adria inclosed her missive in an envelope to the Crofton firm, begging them to forward it immediately to his address.

Heretofore, letters had arrived from him at regular intervals, every one imbued with sentiments of hope and fealty. But now time dragged away; days lengthened into weeks, and no token or word came to assure her of his grief for her sorrow, his steadfast constancy. Still she never doubted him.

Could she but have known the actual cause of this strange silence! The reader may penetrate the mystery here, though Adria was destined to remain in suspense for a weary interval.

A feeling of common respect prevented Reginald Templeton from attempting to carry his threat into execution during the first months of her bereavement.

There had been a warm scene at The Firs between the father and son. Colonel Templeton was now as anxious to destroy the possibility of an alliance between Reginald and Adria as he had before been to prosecute that consummation. It was the heiress—not the girl

—at whom he aimed. Now that their stations were reversed, he would have had his son transfer his attentions to Valeria. But Reginald was not easily swayed, and after some hot words they had dropped mention of the subject between them, but were neither ready to ignore the issue.

And, meanwhile, Reginald, not openly pressing his cause, was working stealthily toward its attainment.

One of the fast men of his set, De Courcy, had succumbed to the vicissitudes of fortune—or rather folly—and after running through an ample patrimony, found himself deserted by his friends of the hour, and with starvation outspread before him.

At this juncture young Templeton came to his aid. He had some personal influence with a few lax-moraled city grandees, and his father's reputed standing invested him with more. By a judicious use of this power he obtained a situation for his unfortunate friend as agent on the immediate mail route.

De Courcy, like most men of his class, knew conscience only as a name. He had no punctilious scruples in breaking his oath and violating his duty to serve the one who had stood by him in need. Through this agency, then, the missives, for which Adria watched and longed and grew sick at heart that she received no word, were transferred instead into the rival lover's hands.

In due time the outstanding claims were brought against the surviving members of the firm. But the controlling spirits of the establishment were gone. While Banks was identified with them, he had molded the junior partners plastically to his will. After his flight they had fallen back upon Mr. Ellesford, believing that he would guide them safely through the financial storm. With his decease, and the subsequent flood of liabilities flowing in upon them, they gave up all attempt to fight against the workings of adverse fortune.

Clark and Nelson were strictly honest and honorable men. They yielded up every farthing to their creditors, and the result proved more favorable than they had hoped. The assets yielded dollar for dollar. No man was wronged, but they were left without a foothold upon even the bottom round of the ladder of worldly prosperity.

It was some trivial matter connected with the settlement of these claims which brought Jonathan Sharpe to The Firs. Colonel Templeton had proved a valuable auxiliary in his double character of patron and client, and the lawyer had come personally in preference to sending one of his clerks.

Their business concluded Sharpe rose, leaning against the door-sill as he worked his large hands into a pair of dog-skin gloves.

"You know Kerr?" he asked.

"The detective? I have reason to," Colonel Templeton's face shaded darkly. "He and I have come near clashing once or twice."

"He's not in the force now. Quarreled with the chief and was dismissed. He has a devilish spirit but they have lost a good officer. He's lightning, sir, on a search!"

"Ah, no doubt," Templeton returned, touching a match to the cigar in his teeth.

"He's rusticated with your fair neighbor of the Grange. Following up some old clew in the hope of reinstatement, I have heard."

"The devil!" The lighted cigar had fallen in the midst of loose papers upon the table, but was secured before damage resulted. "At the Grange, you said?"

"Yes, but not in character. He appears in the form of the lady's solicitor, and is ostensibly engaged with matters pertaining to the estate. By the way, how about Jenkins's foreclosure?"

Rid of his visitor a few moments later, Colonel Templeton paced the floor back and forth with teeth sunk deep in his under lip. A lowering anxiety hung over his face, but no expression to denote the traceries of his thought. Then the shade was swept away, and he went out directing his steps toward the Grange.

He had already paid assiduous court to the heiress, and received his reward by penetrating her secret. He was well aware of her partiality for his son. He read her, too, as a woman well calculated to further his scheme, and one who would not shrink from employing doubtful means to procure a coveted end.

Valeria was alone, having just dismissed the pseudo-solicitor from her presence. She met him very graciously, while he turned some ready compliment to account.

"Reginald was here an hour ago," she said. "How wretchedly ill he is looking!"

"I think my son's disease is more mind than body," he returned, absently. He was study-

ing her and the extent to which he should deal with her.

"Then you should take some decisive measures to restore his mental equilibrium," she declared, with apparent laughing candor, but surprising his searching scrutiny with a quick, comprehensive glance from beneath downcast lids.

"Exactly what I have come to consult you about," he said, half-amazed and half-relieved that she should anticipate the expression of his thought.

"Consult me!" she echoed, her wide-open hazel eyes now delivering an admirable interpretation of innocent wonderment.

"Yes, you," he returned, calmly smiling. "I see you have penetrated his hallucination. Strange that still retaining his faculties unimpaired, he should so confound identities."

Their glances met again, his questioning, hers with comprehensive response. But she affected child-like ignorance.

"Please explain to me. I am so dull. You know I shall be only too happy to serve yourself or Reginald, so far as I can."

A cynical gleam shot from his eyes.

"You must know that my son is very deeply in love with—ahem!—with the Ellesford heiress. I don't fear that you will misinterpret my meaning. As I said, very deeply in love, so much so indeed that his brain has become slightly affected, thereby causing a lamentable and exceedingly annoying misapprehension. He has become imbued with the belief that his love is embodied in the person of your companion—a very good sort of woman I know her to be—while you and I are well aware that his enslaver is your own fair self. Suppose his delusion should continue, what deplorable consequences he may unmeaningly bring upon himself. I think it is our duty, Miss Walton, to combine efforts toward saving him."

"Undoubtedly," she replied. "My poor Reginald! What measures do you propose taking, Colonel Templeton?"

"I think," he said, slowly, "our first care must be to remove the cause of his misapprehension. Not too suddenly, nor in a manner calculated to raise suspicion of any except her own agency, but so securely that he shall be able to discover no trace of her. Yes, certainly, she must be removed."

CHAPTER XVIII.

WEARISOME winter days that came and went with unvaried monotony in the bare little prison room. Nelly Kent had long since given up all hope of escape or succor.

At first she had busied her brain with impossible plans, but the strong rough plank sides and loop-holes high above letting in light and air were alike impregnable to her efforts. She settled into an apathetic state, broken by intervals of violent grief which first perplexed, then worked alarm, in the mind of her captor.

Luke Peters had not confined himself closely as Colonel Templeton supposed (perhaps as he desired), to the precincts of the mill. Scarcely a night but he kept prowling vigil about The Firs, and upon the actions of the unconscious occupants. With the distrust which one villain always entertains for another, he feared treachery and betrayal.

Colonel Templeton was not one to keep an implement which had aided his evil-doing about him for naught, and this long season of inactivity aroused the suspicions of the man in hiding. He ventured cautiously into the fishing-village, down upon the coast, and there had succeeded in obtaining an acquaintance with the colonel's son.

It has already been intimated that Reginald Templeton belonged to that floating class in society yeapt fast men. Notoriously a *roué*, his stalwart figure and handsome face combined with the winning manner which none could better assume, found favor for him alike with all degrees. Even in this primitive village more than one buxom, stout-limbed young fisherwench, had listened to his sophistries to the sacrifice of her maiden innocence.

On one such occasion Peters had rendered him valuable service in averting the well-merited vengeance sworn by a brother of the victim. In return, Reginald took a fancy to the dark-browed, mysterious man, and intrusted him with some commissions of no very reputable nature, but which were faithfully executed.

During this time Peters scrupulously concealed his abode, but one day some whim induced young Templeton to return from the village by way of Cross-lot Stile. A thin blue vapor curling up from the neighborhood of the deserted mill attracted his curiosity. Following it,

he found the man busied over a fire in the shed which had done duty as a wheel-house, but from which the great drum had long been detached, and where a rude clay chimney had been constructed. Since the chance discovery he had come once or twice to the place, but Luke, ever watchful for intruders, met him in the wood skirting the stream.

Early spring-time came but the season was backward, and the spirit of frost and snow maintained reign. Peters was possessed with a guilty unrest. Nelly Kent was slowly but surely pining away. With no hope and no comfort before her, she steadily refused to make any exertion of will which might stay the life-blood certainly ebbing away.

She listened unmoved to the pleadings and threats of her jailer. Indeed, she seldom seemed to hear his words, or hearing, to understand their import. The violent outbursts which came at times when she thought that her little son was somewhere in the wide, cruel world, and would never now know her mother's care, less often disturbed her morbidly-melancholy state. She never thought of him except as the brave, winsome boy she had clasped to her breast in all the agony of parting, that morn when he had gone away from her—forever, she always added.

Peters went into her room one day with some morsel of dainty food he had procured for her. She turned from it with an expression of disgust, the first indication of consciousness she had evidenced for hours.

"Eat a little, a very little," he plead with her, humbly and gently now. "You have touched nothing to-day. You cannot keep strength unless you eat."

"I want no strength," she said, wearily. "Why can't you let me die in peace? You have tortured me through all my life. Go away now, and let me die."

"Oh, *cara mia*, you must not die!" The sin-hardened man fairly sobbed above her. "Live, only live, and I will undo what I can of the wrong I have done."

She shook her head feebly. It was the first time in weeks she had willingly conversed with him.

"Men are all false," she said. "You would only break your word were I well again. I would rather die now."

"I swear I will be true to the promise I give you," he declared, vehemently. "I will restore you to your boy and trouble you no more. Think of it—of you and he back in the home that is yours. Oh, live, live!"

Something in his words struck her, and she pondered silently. She was very weak and even the exertion of speaking tired her. She replied to him presently, but her utterance was painful.

"I shall be glad to leave so much sorrow," she said; "but my boy should have his father's inheritance. I never wanted it for myself. Will you not let your enmity die with me, and restore him to his rights after I am gone?"

"I will do anything you command me now," he answered.

"The papers," she continued, "you will need them to prove his legitimate claim. The certificates of my marriage and his birth! They are in the secret drawer of the little table—the one in the arched chamber. You press the eyeball of the cormorant's head in the carving, and it will open. There is something else"—her fingers clutched at the locket which all this time she had concealed about her—"but I am tired now; I will tell you again."

She closed her eyes and her breath came pantingly. The man beside her, in that moment, repented those acts of his which had brought her to this. After that she slept easily, and he stole away quietly that she might not be disturbed.

Out of her presence some of his remorse wore away, and he began to indulge again in hopes of her ultimate recovery.

"If I can but take her back," he thought, "old Juana will nurse her into life again."

He was loitering upon the river-bank, but with the sound of approaching footsteps, he turned and walked rapidly out of ear-shot, of the mill. A few paces further he met Reginald Templeton on the look-out for him.

"You want me?" Peters asked.

"Yes!" He glanced around, as though fearing eavesdroppers even in that obscure quarter.

"It's a hazardous job, but I'll pay you well if you succeed."

"I don't much mind danger," Peters replied.

"I'm hardened to it, I should think."

"It's a sweetheart of mine, an obdurate little minx, who's willing enough at heart, but seems bound to play fast and loose indefinitely."

The man detected an earnestness beneath his

assumed light manner, which he threw aside a moment after.

"I'll tell you the whole truth, Peters, and rely on your helping me. I'm in earnest this time, and mean the girl no harm. I intend to marry her fair and square. She was willing enough once, but another man came between us. I want to get her in my power; she'll be only too glad then to accept any terms I may offer. Once my wife I defy Heaven itself to take her from me."

His face flushed with rising excitement, but the man's quiet indifference recalled him to himself.

"What do you propose?"

"I want you to get her here to the mill. I know its crannies of old. There are snug corners enough, which, with a little work, will answer the purpose and be tight as a trap."

Peters stiffened at the suggestion, until his sinewy frame was rigid as cast steel.

"I can't have a woman's eyes and tongue agog here," he said, sullenly. "Make it any other crib, and I'm your man."

"There's not another such a place in the country," Reginald declared. "It will be but for a few days, Peters, and I pledge myself that nothing to your detriment shall come through it. Come, I'll make it well worth your while. Say a hundred dollars for getting her here, and as much more for the time she stays. You'll not soon make another two hundred so easily."

"The pay's good enough," Luke said, slowly. He was thinking to himself. "Why not? It may be the means of saving her! A woman might cheer her up—anyway, it will do no harm."

So he said, aloud:

"If you agree to see me safely through, I'll do as well by you. It's a bargain, then! Who is the bit of dinity I am to secure for you?"

"It is Miss Ellesford, of the Grange. Remember, my man, you are to treat her with every respect!"

He then proceeded to give a minute description of Adria's proceal appearance and daily habits. He left Peters to decide upon his own course in accomplishing the abduction.

"To-morrow night, if possible," he concluded, "I have a reason for wishing to hasten the affair."

This reason at that moment lay in his pocket, in shape of a note from Hastings. It announced his return to Crofton, and his intention of presenting a speedy appearance at the Grange. He had received no replies to his numerous letters, but attributed this fact to his own uncertain locations.

While Reginald yet lingered, there came the sound of horse's hoofs borne down from the beaten bridle-path. With a last hasty word, he plunged into a thicket of scrubby undergrowth, making his way homeward over the barren fields. A moment later his father, Colonel Templeton, drew rein almost upon the very spot he had so lately quitted.

Coincidences are of not rare occurrence. Plotting and counter-plotting frequently defeat each other unawares.

Strangely enough Colonel Templeton, though actuated by entirely opposite motives, was here upon the self-same mission that had brought his son.

"She must be removed," he had said to Valeria. Who so well fitted to undertake the task as his old ally, Luke Peters? What place so well calculated to furnish secure shelter, yet remain free of suspicion, as the ruinous old mill!

CHAPTER XIX.

EX-DETECTIVE KERR sat by the quaint old side-table in the arched chamber. At his own request, this room had been deputed to his use.

He had already made a close and, as he believed, thorough examination of every article of furniture the room had originally contained, without much hope, indeed, that former searches and the lapse of time had escaped any important discovery. Still, he was slightly disappointed when his scrutiny ended, he found himself wiser only in regard to the substantial make and superior quality of the articles.

The contents of the wardrobe were duly overhauled, but the few rich robes and dainty laces revealed no peculiarity which might lead to the identification of the one who had worn them. The two handkerchiefs presented a clew more tangible, which the ex-detective awaited only a plausible pretext to follow.

Just now he was engaged upon a matter which drove from his thoughts all remembrance of the Ellesford mystery.

Several slips of printed paper were spread out before him, and a few written sheets, all re-

lating to the same subject, of which the condensed contents of one slip will give an inkling:

"MURDER AND ROBBERY!—KILLED IN DEFENDING HIS OWN PROPERTY! ETC., ETC.—The double outrage, unmistakably committed by the well-known and daring foreign burglar, Pedro Cardini, alias Rake Snelling, alias Dick Brown. Description: Medium height, thin and wiry; eyes, hair and complexion dark; face badly scarred; teeth even and white; forehead low and beetling," etc. etc.

Ex-detective Kerr was conning these different papers carefully over and comparing their minutest details. This done to his apparent satisfaction, he refolded them in a secure packet and placed them in an inner pocket.

"I have no fear of mistaking my man," he said to himself, very softly. "I think I should know him in the dark."

He spoke softly, because he had proved, during his experience, that walls sometimes have ears, but he brought his hand down upon the table beside him, by way of emphasis. Possibly the action was made without reference to effect. At all events, it struck the table's edge, glancing ungracefully and with tingling sensation over the sharp carving below. He was naturally a hasty man, but now he repressed the imprecation which rose to his lips, and, bending forward, closely scanned that portion of the pendent side. He had felt something give beneath his touch.

His fingers successively sought every protrusion in the grotesque work, and his diligence was richly rewarded. The cormorant's eye yielded beneath his pressure. A little drawer shot out from the apparently solid wood-work. With methodical precision he drew forth and examined its contents—merely a small roll of yellowed parchments.

Whatever surprise he may have felt over his perusal of their contents, his placid countenance expressed none. He quietly placed the documents in the same receptacle which had swallowed up the former packet, shot the little drawer, now empty, back into its place, and went to find Miss Walton.

She was alone, and apparently absorbed in deep reverie, but roused herself to greet his entrance with unusual graciousness.

"We women are fickle creatures, Mr. Kerr," she said, after some commonplace observations. "I have changed my mind about wishing to penetrate the mystery attached to our house. It was merely a woman's whim, as I told you at first, which I was induced to follow from idle curiosity. But I shall claim you as my guest until your private mission to the vicinity has been accomplished."

His inscrutable gaze rested for a second upon her likewise inscrutable face.

"You are fully satisfied, just as matters stand?" he asked.

"Entirely. In fact, I think I prefer the mystery. It gives the place an air of interest it would not otherwise possess."

He bowed silently, and the subject was dismissed.

Miss Walton exerted herself to the utmost to please her guest. She talked vivaciously, chaining his attention, if not his mind, until the dinner hour. After that she led him back to the cosy parlor, where the blazing fire sent flashes of ruddy light into every corner. Installing him in the easiest of easy-chairs, with the genial warmth about him, she seated herself at the piano and played piece after piece in that minor key which pervades the air with a somnolent influence akin to the soothing effects of a self-voiced lullaby.

No doubt Mr. Kerr, being no longer a young man, would have succumbed to the potent spell, had it not been for a withdrawing influence.

He was an inveterate snuff-taker, and had, unfortunately, forgotten his box of Macaboy upon the table in his room. He sought in vain to excuse himself, but Valeria's assiduities prevented his momentary absence. So the ex-detective leaned back in his velvet-cushioned chair, longing intensely for his favorite relish, and mentally inveighing against the whim which had suddenly invested him with so great importance.

There was a sound of scurrying feet in the passage-way, and the housekeeper appeared in the doorway, with cap awry, and dire consternation depicted upon her countenance.

"What is it, Davis?" inquired Valeria, sharply. "I gave you my orders, I believe."

"Oh, Miss Walton!" cried Davis, unmindful of the implied reproach, "if you please, miss, there's a strange man in the house. I was a-coming from the left wing, in by the little porch-way, and through the hall, when I run slap ag'in' him. Oh, dear, and the silver isn't

put away, and those careless maids a-chatting, dear knows where."

"Nonsense! you were frightened at your own shadow," declared Valeria, angrily. "You should know better than to come with such a silly tale. Mr. Kerr, I beg of you, don't let this disturb you! My housekeeper is developing a brilliant imagination."

Notwithstanding her evident annoyance, Valeria went out into the hall, and demonstrated, to her own satisfaction, at least, that Davis's apparition had been conjured through aid of Mr. Kerr's overcoat, thrown carelessly upon the rack.

"Go back to your duty, and let me hear no more false alarms," she said, accompanying the command with a significant look.

Mr. Kerr, taking no fright from the alleged proximity of a strange man, gladly hailed this episode. It gave him opportunity to steal, unperceived, away in quest of his Macaboy.

The Grange, not falling within limit of gas corporations, was lighted by more primitive means. A great chandelier, swinging in the main hall, sent its gleams far back into minor passages. With no other illumination, he made his way toward the arched room.

His quiet footfall gave back no echo. The door swung noiselessly beneath his touch, and he paused one second transfixed with astonishment.

A dark form bent above the little table, across which a single shaft of light was thrown. There was no sound, but some innate sense must have told this figure that an intruder was present. The dark lantern flashed its light suddenly on every side, then was merged in total darkness.

The same instant ex-detective Kerr found himself sprawling in the center of the floor, and heard the click of the key in the door by which he had entered.

"Neatly done, by Jove!" he whispered, admiringly, as he picked himself up from his lowly position. "That back-hand stroke would assure me of my man had I caught no glimpse of his features."

And Mr. Kerr proceeded coolly to possess himself of his snuff-box, still upon the table, then groped his way to a glass entrance door. He knew the uselessness of giving alarm. His man was safe out of the way for the present, he was convinced, but let him mark their next meeting.

The following morning Adria did not appear, but Valeria silenced all conjectures by announcing that her companion had left on the early train for Washington, from which she had received communications from one of her mother's relatives, offering her a temporary home. Miss Walton added that she could not censure the girl for accepting this offer. No doubt the constant reminder of old associations rendered her late situation at the Grange less pleasant than it might otherwise have been.

CHAPTER XX.

WHILE the ex-detective was leisurely recovering from the assault made upon him, Adria sat in her own room in a distant part of the building. Her deft fingers were busy darning a rent in a costly lace set belonging to Valeria. The accidental tear had occasioned the latter considerable vexation, and she thankfully accepted Adria's offer to make it good as new again.

The work fell from her hands after a time completed. The ragged edges joined so neatly that the tiny stitches seemed but a continuation of the brodered pattern.

A slightly pungent odor, not unpleasant, filled the room, and Adria found herself growing consciously drowsy. A listless desire for complete inaction, a wish to float away to the misty dreamland closing in around her. She thought she saw Kenneth there beckoning her to come; then he seemed beside her, his footstep sounding in her ear, and then she lost her vague imaginings in utter unconsciousness.

Luke Peters, at her side, dropped the handkerchief saturated with chloroform he had been applying to her nostrils. Throwing a warm shawl about her, he caught her light weight in his sinewy arms, and with stealthy, cat-like tread, traversed the passage-way, then paused a second to reconnoiter.

A woman's garment rustled by him, and a voice whispered:

"All is safe; but you must hasten. Did you succeed?"

"Couldn't have done better," he returned, in the same tone.

Clearing the lighted hall with a couple of noiseless springs, he let himself out at the great entrance door.

A moment later Valeria's fair hands locked

and bolted it behind him. Then she went back to the parlor all aglow with ruddy light, and her self-imposed task of making herself agreeable to her guest. Mr. Kerr, snuff-box in hand, and gently tapping its flagree lid, looked the picture of unconscious complacency, and smiled appreciation upon the entertaining efforts of his young hostess.

Adria came back to half consciousness and a sensation of painful lassitude; but fancying herself in her own bed, she only turned her head wearily and drowsed into oblivion again.

The gray dawn of early morning faintly penetrated those great garrets in the old mill when she awoke. The narrow limits of the unfamiliar apartment dimly traced through the semi-obscure, startled her into a belief that she was still dreaming. Shaking off the impression, she arose and examined the place with a mingled feeling of wonder and dread.

It was exactly similar to the one in which Nelly Kent had found herself, and had been fitted by Peters for his own occupancy.

Adria was alarmed, and for the moment awed. How had she been spirited away from her room at the Grange to this strange place? She tried to recall any action of her own which might have led her there, but memory paused at the moment when her finished work fell from her hands. But, stop! Some half-tangible recollection struggled slowly into her mind. The odor—the pungent inhalation—the half-recognized presence beside her, what were they? A suspicion of the truth, glimmering and uncertain, impressed her.

Her head throbbed with pain, and her brain whirled dizzily, but as she moved about these wore gradually away.

She beat upon the rough planks with her bare hands, and called loudly to be released. Only an echo shrieked back at her, and her delicate hands grew sore and bruised from contact with the boards. Once she fancied she heard low moans, and the sound of footfalls, but listening distinguished but the beating of her own heart.

It seemed to her that hours had worn away when the door was opened, admitting Reginald Templeton, but it was still morning.

He had hastened to the mill thus early in the day to make certain of his victory and her helplessness.

She shrunk back at the sight of him; then her outraged pride came to the rescue, and she confronted him with just anger.

"Was it your doing that has subjected me to this insult?" she demanded.

"Forgive me, Adria; but you left me no gentler measure. Can not you see that it is a humiliation to me as well as yourself to be driven to this course? I would have preferred a straightforward wooing!"

"This is an ungentlemanly and ungenerous act," she said, "and one which would not tend to advance your cause were I even inclined to favor it. I demand an instant reparation. Release me; do not seek me again, and I will strive to forget the occurrence."

"I have acted from no passing impulse, Adria. This consummation has been studiously contemplated and carefully carried into effect. You will never leave this place until you have consented to become my wife!"

Her eyes flashed angrily.

"I forbade you once, Reginald Templeton, uttering such sentiment to me. If I am powerless to protect myself from your insults, there will come a time of reckoning, and with one less disposed to be lenient than I am now."

"That is—?" he questioned, scornfully.

"One whom I shall be proud to acknowledge my liege! He to whom I consider myself truly bound as though our marriage rites had already been pronounced. One whom I respect and love with my whole soul—Kenneth Hastings."

A low, sneering laugh escaped his lips. "The false lover who deserted you in your hour of need? He who would have wedded you for your fair estate, but turned cold when your adversity came? Is it loyalty to his fickle memory which will cause you to throw aside my love, tried and true?"

"You speak falsely," she asseverated. "His true heart can know no change."

He regarded her with mocking complacency.

"Ah, he has shown his fealty! He has sought you in your sorrow, has assuaged your grief! He has offered to share with you his home, lowly though it be—or lacking that, he has written of his haste to build up a nest for his lone bird! Ah, yes! he has proved himself leal and true."

"How dare you impute such baseness to him?" she cried, angrily, and Reginald inwardly triumphed, knowing that his shaft had told. "Say no more, but release me immediately, I demand of you."

"On my terms?"

"Never!"

"Adria," he said, quietly, but his lips were pale with suppressed rage, "take care how you provoke me. I swore once to humble your pride—to bring you to my feet, begging for the right and the love I have offered you. I told you once that your influence could make a good man of me! I tell you now that I can make of myself a devil incarnate if needs be to accomplish my purpose. My love for you has been the purest emotion I ever knew. Don't drive me to the desperation which will bring down a weight of shame upon your head. If such shall come it will be your own doing. I give you one last chance. Think well before you knowingly bring upon yourself a fate which you are powerless to avert."

In that moment she realized how utterly helpless she was, and she cowered before the scathing import of his words. He turned away, not daring to trust himself further.

"I will come to-morrow for my answer," he said, passing out and closing the door securely after him.

Miserable, hapless Adria! The foul fate threatening her was only more torturesome than the possibility of her lover's untruth. A woman can experience no keener agony than through knowledge that the one on whom she lavished the whole love of her trusting nature, is unworthy the devotion given him. The knowledge will shatter the idol, but it will break the worshiper's heart-strings, too.

The door unclosed again and Peters stood within it. Adria, supposing him a tool of her enemy, acknowledged his presence by an indifferent glance.

"What do you want?" she asked, as he waited there silently.

"To be your friend, Miss Ellesford," the man said, civilly. She turned to him quickly.

"You will help me away from here?"

"I daren't do that," he returned; "but I'll help you escape the machinations of the man who has just left you. Will not this prove my sincerity?"

He gave her a bit of crumpled paper. It was Kenneth's note—the last he had written. She absorbed its contents with eager eyes.

"Oh, thank God that he is true!" she cried, fervently, grateful tears swelling up and blinding her sight. Forcing them back, she went to the man, taking his hard hand between her palms.

"I will trust to you," she said. "You have given me back my precious faith. I can not thank you as I would like, but I will pray that God may bless you for your kindness to me this day."

She felt the shudder which ran through his frame.

"I don't much believe in prayers," he said, grimly, "but yours can do me no harm. So pray for me if you like, little one!"

She stroked his hand silently, and then asked:

"Where did you get it—the letter?"

"Reginald Templeton pulled it out of his pocket with some—some money he paid me."

"For keeping me here?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I'm not working for him for all that," he said. "I've a stronger incentive on the other side. If I befriended you, Miss Ellesford, can I depend upon your silence regarding such of my affairs as you may learn here?"

"Yes, certainly," she assured him.

"I may have my secrets as well as my betters. I don't think you will attempt to pry into them." And then he told her briefly of the other woman's presence, and her low, morbid condition.

Then he led her to Nelly Kent's side, and Adria was surprised to recognize in the emaciated figure stretched almost helplessly upon the hard couch, the sweet-voiced woman who had once appeared at the Grange.

"She must have wine and nutritious food," she told Peters, and with Reginald's help he procured them that very day.

He had not over-estimated the influence another woman's gentle attendance would exert over the one who had been imprisoned there so long.

Nelly Kent, who had remained impervious to his best endeavors, slowly revived beneath Adria's treatment. The girl insisted that she should partake freely of the nourishment provided her, and as her strength returned slowly, drew her unwillingly out into the body of the mill, and gradually induced her to take much needed bodily exercise.

Peters at first demurred a little at allowing them so much liberty, but Adria's assurance

that she would make no attempt to escape satisfied him.

And meanwhile they matured a plan which should result in the defeat of Reginald Templeton's darker scheme.

When the young man came again, Adria met him with less manifest aversion than she had betrayed on the former occasion. He again pleaded his cause ardently, and she did not repulse him.

"What faith can I have in any man if Kenneth is false?" she asked, averting her face lest he should see its tell-tale flush. The concession was more than he had expected.

"Remember, he was an utter stranger," he said. "I will devote my whole life to prove my truth, my Adria."

His evident sincerity appeared to touch her. At the end of a week she had so far yielded to his entreaties as to promise vaguely that his persistent suit should receive its reward.

Elated at his success, he went out from her presence so absorbed in his triumph that he passed within a few yards of another comer without observing him. The latter man passed his hand over his vision as though doubting its accuracy, and then assured, with a hardening of the lines about his mouth, strode on into the mill.

It was Colonel Templeton!

CHAPTER XXI.

As Nelly Kent came slowly back to life and hope, a warm affection sprang up in her heart for the fair young girl who waited upon her tenderly as a daughter might do for a loved mother.

A day or two preceding the event which closed the last chapter, the two were together in Adria's little nook, which had been furnished with a few articles of comfort.

Fresh bedding, a chair or two, a bit of rich carpeting, looking strangely out of place amid its rough surroundings, necessary toilet utensils and a small hand-mirror, had been provided by Reginald. Nelly's presence had been kept scrupulously from his knowledge, as well as the range Adria enjoyed except during his visits.

Nelly was bolstered up in a comfortable position, and Adria, deft-handed as any lady's maid, loosed her mass of heavy, dark hair, which she proceeded to comb and brush very tenderly, that the invalid might not be wearied by the operation.

"How beautiful it is," she said, catching up the rippling, glossy lengths, and coiling them smoothly round the other's head. "Not a single gray thread! Why, you have a long life before you yet, dear Nelly, and I hope a happy one."

Nelly put up her hand, touching the silky mass.

"My sorrows should have turned it snow-white," she returned, sadly. "God keep you from ever knowing such."

Adria's eyes filled with tearful sympathy.

"I have often wished," she began, timidly, "that you would tell me of your former life. I do not wish to grieve you by recalling painful reminiscences, unless the knowledge of my loving interest should fit me to receive your confidence. Speaking freely of old wounds will sometimes take away the sharpest pain lingering in them."

Nelly bowed her face upon her hands for a time. There were anguished traces there when she raised it again, but she commanded her voice to a steady monotone.

"My story is a sad one," she said, "and I have striven vainly for years to efface my old existence from my memory. I would not have my sorrows dim a single hour of your young life; but if it is your wish, you shall penetrate the mystery which left me so long in utter darkness, pierced now by a little ray of hope for future contentment, thank Heaven!"

Adria poured some wine into a goblet, placing it near her, and sat quietly down awaiting the elder woman's narrative.

"I was born in Italy," Nelly began. "My father was an Englishman, and an adventurer—my mother the daughter of a noble house. My father married her solely for the distinction and wealth he hoped to attain by means of the alliance. Judge, then, his disappointment when my grandfather—who had been always bitterly opposed to the match—cast off his favorite daughter, sending her and the man she had chosen out into the world, with his bitter curse and unforgiving enmity, to take their chance among the common herd."

"The marriage proved eminently unhappy. I think my parents both bitterly regretted the rash step they had taken. At one time they

separated, my mother going back to her childhood's home, to crave the toleration which would not have been denied a stranger suffering as she was then. She was denied admittance! When she pleaded for but a moment's audience with the stern old man, his orders caused the door to be shut in her very face. But she had one friend beneath that roof. It was her maid, Juana, who stole forth and joined her lot with that of the outcast.

"My father received her, with her attendant, back beneath his protection—unwillingly, I have every reason to believe, but he dared not leave her shelterless in the streets. After my birth they bore with each other more patiently."

"He had been a strolling actor once, and when the means derived from the sale of my mother's jewelry and rich clothing had been utterly exhausted, he went back to the old profession."

"The life we led, as I can first remember it, was one of wretched poverty, unseasoned by any of the submission or cheerfulness which true love might have imparted. My mother died, and existence dragged on in the old way, except, as I grew older, my efforts contributed something toward the improvement of our circumstances."

"I had a good voice, in no way remarkable, and some dramatic ability. These procured me ready employment in secondary parts. When I was sixteen, my father was rendered helpless by a stage accident, and, after months of lingering torture, I shed tears which were almost joyful that he died. Do not think me unnatural in saying this. I had never given him much affection, but I am glad to remember that I proved myself a dutiful child. After his injury, his bodily agony had been so intense that he prayed hourly for death, and it came to him as a welcome release."

"I was then attached to an opera troupe, stationed at the time in Parma. A few months later we left that place for Modena, and from thence to the principal cities of Tuscany and Naples."

"During this time, a member of the company, Pedro Cardini, had been persecuting me with attentions, which, in my unprotected situation, I was powerless to resent, except by steadily refusing to encourage his love. He was both ardent and vindictive. One night he encountered me, unattended, on the street, and, walking by my side, urged his suit so persistently that I grew angry, and replied to him with some scornful words."

"He was enraged then, and threatened me until I grew frightened, and tried to escape him; but he seized my wrist, holding me fast."

"Dare to love any other man," he hissed in my ear, "and I will follow you with my vengeance to the death!"

"I screamed then, loudly, for aid, and a gentleman passing came to my assistance—a foreign gentleman, with white, aristocratic face, and fair hair curling about his temples. He had a sad look in his great hazel eyes, but it faded out of them as he looked at me. He spoke a few sharp words to Pedro, and, when the fellow had slunk away, conducted me to the door of my lodging."

"After that I encountered him often, and learned to watch for his fair, handsome face among the multitude turned nightly toward the stage. To be brief, he wooed me with the love of an honorable man, and when he sailed for his American home, I accompanied him—his wife!"

"My husband was Hugh Ellesford."

Adria started with a surprised exclamation, but quieted herself again to listen now with breathless interest. Nelly resumed:

"He was a proud, sensitive man, and reserved with all except me. During the first weeks of our married life, he told me of his former engagement. He had loved the lady dearly, he said, but not with the absorbing passion he felt for me, and he had long ceased to regret her lack of faith. He possessed her miniature, but gave it into my charge, telling me to destroy it if I chose. I kept it instead, studied it until I knew every line in her fair face, and rejoiced that my dark beauty far surpassed her unimpassioned style."

"I soon discovered that my husband shrunk from proclaiming to his friends the marriage which they would term a misalliance. I, too, remembering Pedro's threats, longed only for a secluded life with him, and my good Juana, who refused to be separated from me."

"Yielding to my urgent solicitations, after our landing, he procured me quiet country lodging, and went alone to his home, where he secretly prepared the arched chamber for my use. When all was in readiness, he took me there

In the night-time, that prying eyes should not discover my presence.

"There my life was one long holiday, disturbed only by fears that Pedro's vengeance might find me out.

"When my baby came, my winsome, wee boy, my cup of happiness was full. But, as he grew older, his father and I realized his need of unrestrained freedom, which he could not enjoy at the Grange. We sent him in charge of my faithful nurse to a small village on the Virginia coast. A few weeks later she came back alone, almost wild with grief over his death. My sorrow was extreme, but I had my idolized husband left me, and in time became reconciled to the loss of my boy.

"But my health now began to give way, and Hugh insisted upon my taking frequent trips to other sections. Such constant confinement to the house, relieved only by night rambles through the grounds, had brought on this evil, he said. I must take intervals when I could openly enjoy the light and sunny warmth necessary to my restoration. I yielded, as I always did to his wishes. Sometimes he accompanied me, but oftener I went alone.

"On one of these occasions I was haunted by a vague presentiment of pending ill. It weighed down upon me with increasing force, until, fearing I knew not what, I returned to the Grange a fortnight earlier than had been agreed at our parting.

"I came upon Juana unexpectedly. She was crouching on a low step, rocking herself back and forth, with a kind of wailing moan she always uttered when in distress. All my worst fears revived. I darted past her, expecting to find my husband dying, perhaps dead. She clutched at my garments trying to detain me, but I shook her off and fled toward the room which was his and mine. Voices in the private parlor stopped me there."

She paused, pale and agitated, but swallowing the wine Adria passed her, continued:

"I burst open the door and faced a scene I would rather have died than beheld.

"A woman reclined upon the sofa which was my favorite resting-place, and my husband, sitting by her, held her hand in his. I recognized her at a glance, though she had grown older and more careworn than the face the miniature portrayed.

"They both started up at my unexpected appearance. I can not dwell upon the agony of the moment. I think I shrieked out my curses upon them; I know there was murder in my heart as my eyes rested on her colorless face. I turned and fled lest my hands should do her harm, and even then I loved him so I would not for worlds have hurt the creature who had won his heart back from me.

"I remember nothing more distinctly until I found myself in a little New England village, destitute of support. Then I went to work in one of the cotton factories there, in preference to taking up my old theatrical life. There the papers brought the news of my husband's terrible death.

"I kept my first situation for five years. After that time changes were made at the Brankley mills. They changed ownership, and the new proprietors brought with them employees from their own locality, thus throwing many of the old Brankley hands out of work, myself among the number.

"I succeeded, however, in finding employment in a neighboring factory, but during my first week there, met with the accident which disabled me for all future toil. I had communicated occasionally with my faithful Juana, and she now wrote imploring my return. So I left Crofton with the one friend Heaven raised up for me in my extremity."

"Crofton!" interrupted Adria, eagerly. "Was it Crofton where you worked during those years?"

"Yes. First with the Brankleys and afterward with the Russell Brothers!"

"The Russell Brothers!" echoed Adria. "Then you must have known him. Do you remember a young man in their employ—Kenneth Hastings?"

"He was the friend of whom I spoke, who lightened my dreary illness by his kind attentions, and under whose protection I traveled," Nelly said, her eyes misting with the grateful memory. "But how should you know of him?"

"He is my lover of whom I have told you," Adria answered, a happy glow upon her cheeks. "His generous kindness to you proves him worthy of the respect and regard I have meted him."

"May you never find yourself disappointed in him," said Nelly, fervently. "My sad experi-

ence has left me little faith in man's constancy, but he is a noble youth."

Adria's face held an inquiry which she refrained from uttering, lest it should probe her companion's sore memories too deeply; but reading her expression, Nelly said:

"You would ask me if I knew by what means Hugh Ellesford came to his untimely end. He found his death upon that night when I fled away from the Grange with brain on fire and heart chilled to ice; but of the manner, or by whom such awful retribution was wrought upon him, I am ignorant as you. I never tried to pierce the mystery. I never attempted to establish my claim as his wife; for myself I could not touch the wealth he left, but now that I know my boy lives it is my duty to restore him to his own."

"You have guessed that the man who guards us here is Pedro Cardini."

Then she related to Adria how she had been assured that her child lived after all these years she had mourned him dead.

After that, she drew from her bosom the jeweled locket, explaining:

"That night, in my mad anger, I tore it from my neck and dashed it at my husband's feet, declaring that I never wished to look upon his face again. But the morning when you so kindly received me at the Grange, I secured it from the secret nook where it had been placed. Now, that the rancor of my pain is gone, I can forgive him for his faithlessness, for I know I am true to his memory, as the other woman can not be. The faces are his, and mine, painted ere we sailed from beautiful Italy."

She touched the spring of the locket, giving it opened to Adria.

The latter recognized Hugh Ellesford's likeness from a portrait at the Grange; but she lingered over the other dark, glowing face depicted there. It was very unlike the wan, haggard countenance of the woman beside her, but another resemblance struck her with convincing force.

"I have seen another face almost its exact counterpart, nearly as a man's face can be like a woman's, and that other is Kenneth Hastings!"

CHAPTER XXII.

COLONEL TEMPLETON stepped quietly over the threshold, but Luke Peters, meeting him, read the silent anger in his face. All his sullen doggedness came up to aid him through this issue.

"I've not betrayed you, Colonel Templeton," he said. "I see you think it."

"How then could he trace her here?" the other asked.

Luke chuckled.

"He hired me to do the job an hour before you suggested it," he answered. "I found I could kill my 'two birds' with perfect ease, and you shouldn't be the man to blame me for doing it, Alan Templeton."

Colonel Templeton sunk his teeth in his lips to repress his angry utterance—it was a trick he had when greatly annoyed.

"How far has the young fool succeeded?" he asked.

"He's wrung a promise from her to marry him."

Colonel Templeton uttered an oath, and made as though he would have struck down his informant. Luke warded off the blow.

"Keep back your hand, Alan Templeton. You shall see that I have guarded your interests better than you think. I would have sought you to-night, but you have saved me that trouble."

"For what?" he asked. "You knew that my object was to separate those two."

"That you might induce Reginald to woo the Ellesford heiress, and thereby insure yourself of greater safety should time bring to light your share in the tragedy of 'lang syne?' Yes, I know. But your course would never have succeeded, and with your co-operation my plan can scarcely fail."

"Explain yourself," demanded Colonel Templeton; "and be sure you make it a plausible story, or you may wear a hempen collar ere long."

Luke's downcast eyes emitted a vindictive shaft of glittering light, and his fingers worked with convulsive twitching, as though they would have gladly choked out the life of this man who held him in his power.

"I've served you faithfully more than once," he said, sullenly, adding to himself: "But my own will dictated me then, as it does now!"

Then he disclosed his plans. Colonel Templeton, listening attentively, caught the intention, and when he left the mill it was to proceed

directly to the Grange, where he held a long interview with Valeria.

That night a steady spring rain began to fall, but it did not deter Reginald Templeton from seeking the mill next day. He had come to urge the immediate consummation of the ceremony which would make Adria his beyond fear of man parting them.

She seemed to care little what her fate should be now, assuming a belief in Kenneth's falsity.

"Let it be to-night," Reginald said. "I don't wish to keep you in this desolate place, but I can not let you go until you are surely mine."

"I should like to be married in a church," Adria replied, wearily. "But it matters little; our vows will be but a mockery at best."

"It shall be as you wish," Reginald hastened to assure her, glad to propitiate her will in any way. I will have a carriage near as it can approach here at nine to-night. The priest of the little village chapel is celebrated for tying clandestine knots. He will conform to my wishes and ask no questions. We will take the midnight train for Washington, and then, my love, my own, our true existence will begin."

After he left her, Adria wept some passionate, remorseful tears. Her pure nature shrunk from the deceit she was aiding, though it was her sole chance of safety.

He returned punctual to the appointed time. Adria came out of her little room to where he stood in the open body of the mill. A tallow candle pinned to the wall cast a flickering, uncertain light, which yet showed plainly her pale face and swollen eyes. She made one final appeal to his mercy. She was not acting now as she plead with him for the last time.

"Oh, Reginald, Reginald! It is not yet too late. Do not urge me to that act which I meant to commit to-night. For your sake and my own, relinquish your purpose while there is yet time."

"Adria, this is a mere waste of words."

"Oh, think!" she cried. "I do not love you, I never can. I belong to Kenneth, heart and soul. You will not be content with a simply dutiful wife."

"Once mine," he said, "I will make you love me so you will forever bless this hour."

She saw how useless it was to plead. Her voice grew calm and solemn.

"Reginald Templeton, do you take all the responsibility of the unhappy life you may bring upon yourself?"

He was vexed at her persistency.

"Once for all, Adria, Heaven itself could not tempt me to relinquish you."

She went back silently into the little room. Then he saw her emerge, her figure shrouded in the large, thick cloak which had been Nelly Kent's, the hood drawn forward concealing her face. At the instant, Peters, snuffing the single candle, extinguished it. Fortunately, he had already placed the lamp in his dark-lantern, and, opening a slide, threw the light on the way before them. His mission was to accompany them and give away the bride.

The rain was falling fast and steadily.

"The ice will break by to-morrow if this continues," Reginald addressed himself to the man who walked behind them, throwing the light of his dark-lantern on the pathway ahead.

Peters gazed uneasily through the thick darkness toward the river, and made some casual reply. The inclemency of the night made the girl shiver as she drew her wraps closer about her.

Over the sodden fields until they reached the carriage. The rain increased and beat against its closed windows, rendering conversation impracticable.

The priest in the little chapel sleepily awaited their coming. A penitent or two, by restless conscience driven here through the stormy night, knelt in the aisles.

The members of that strange bridal-party assumed their positions before the altar. The marriage solemnities were pronounced, and the two stood man and wife.

Reginald turned to salute his bride. She threw back the covering from her head and revealed the features, not of Adria, but Valeria.

Colonel Templeton stepped out from the shadow of the altar, with a sneering congratulation on his lips, but his words were checked by the tramp of heavy feet coming through the body of the church.

It was the town constable, with a squad of assistants under his command.

Before the inmates recovered from their first surprise, the official advanced, placing his hand firmly on the shoulder of Luke Peters.

"In the name of the commonwealth, you are my prisoner!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

KENNETH HASTINGS returned to Crofton, after a prolonged business tour. He had done well, both for himself and his employers, and the Russell Brothers pronounced high encomiums upon his ability and diligence.

It was here that Adria's missive, containing information of her father's death and her own desolate condition reached him, nearly three months after it was dispatched.

It had followed him from place to place, until it lodged for a time in an obscure office where he had not deemed it necessary to leave his address. From thence it traveled to the Dead Letter Office, from whence it returned to the Russell Brothers, they having inclosed her envelope in a letter of instructions which failed to reach the agent at the proper time.

He was shocked and grieved. With scarcely an hour's delay he set out for the Grange. It was quite dark when the train whizzed up to the little bay-shore station, where he alighted. A heavy rain was falling, and the wind, sweeping up the coast, drove it in drenching gusts; but, deterred by neither the hour nor the weather, he made his way immediately to the Grange.

But here he met with bitter disappointment. Adria had left suddenly, more than a week before. Valeria had gone out in the early afternoon, and had not yet returned. The house-keeper thought she would remain over night with Mrs. Templeton. Mr. Kerr, too, had been gone since morning. There was no one from whom he could obtain the definite information regarding the whereabouts of his darling which he required. So he went back to the village, to procure a night's lodging at the single public house the place afforded.

As he walked, he could hear a dull noise, above the roar of the bay—a heavy, thumping sound, but he gave little heed to it. Why should he? He knew nothing of the awful peril it was heralding for Adria.

He remembered the location of the village chapel, and, coming abreast of it, was surprised to see it alight upon such a night. It seemed to him there was some unusual commotion within, and he hastened to the doorway to ascertain the cause.

At the instant a man ran down the street, uttering hoarse cries of alarm. Kenneth called to him, but he ran on, unheeding. A second messenger came up, less hurriedly, as the people within the church reached the door.

"The ice has broken above, and gorged in the river's turn. The flats are flooded with back-water, and unless the way is opened speedily, the stream will cut a shorter channel across to the bay."

There was a wild shriek from the group at the door—a man's scream—which chilled the blood of the hearers.

Luke Peters raved wildly, and strove to free himself from those holding him in custody.

"They are in the mill!" he cried. "The old mill on the river bank. They will die there—die without aid; be choked by the cold water, or crushed and mangled with the ice. Let me go, I say! Are you men, that you will let them perish without an effort?"

His captors thought it a ruse to escape from their hands. But Colonel Templeton, appalled by the awful danger threatening the girl he had been instrumental in placing there, confirmed his story.

"Miss Ellesford is at the mill," he said, knowing, in that moment of excitement, no one would question how she came there.

Kenneth, in the fast-gathering crowd, sprang forward, with an agonized cry.

"For God's sake, let no time be lost! Let some one, who knows the way, lead on, and all you who have men's hearts, find tools for cutting the ice, and follow as quickly as you can."

Luke Peters caught sight of the young man's excited face, and relapsed into sudden calm.

"It is her son," he whispered to himself.

Then he watched his opportunity, as the panic spread, and, darting unexpectedly away out of his captors' grasp, was lost in the crowd and the thick darkness beyond. He had been handcuffed, but, with a violent effort, he tore his left hand through the clasp of fetter, never heeding the lacerated flesh.

It proved as the man had said. All of the low ground was flooded, and the occasional crash of trees in the direction of the stream's current, told how rapidly the bank was being undermined.

A faint glimmer of light, far out of reach of the men and women flocking there, declared the position of the mill, and that its inmates were yet living.

"Thank God!" went up, fervently, from the assembly. But their position seemed hopeless. No mortal aid could bridge that sea of stiller water between, but where the immense ice-cakes heaved and crushed together with dull, heavy sound.

A few fishermen had dragged their boats to the water's edge, but there was no chance of launching them. The only possibility of their escape lay in giving speedy vent to the rising flood.

Kenneth was foremost in action. A myriad of lanterns flashed their lights from the shore. With ax in hand, he sprang out upon the ice-wall, piled high across the channel, and called loudly for others to follow him. Then the keen steel rung down with steady blows, and, in a second more, a score of able men were at his side, devoting all their strength to the perilous task.

Luke Peters crouched out of range of the lights, glaring at the tiny point of flame far away in the midst of the seething element. Twice he had attempted to reach it by springing from cake to cake of the surging ice, and twice he had been driven back by the impassable, yawning gulfs which opened before him.

A group of fishermen, clustered upon the higher ground, now approached nearer him.

"It's gorging here," one said. "I knew it was out there beyond the mill, or it couldn't have stood so long."

Luke drew himself nearer the water's edge and gazed steadily out. It was as the woman said. The ice had formed in an unbroken line, as far as his sight reached.

He went to the one who had spoken, and asked for her lantern. His wild, pallid face frightened her. He extended his hand, and she saw that it was torn and bleeding.

"Yer hurt, my man," she said, with rough kindness. "Hold ye here, and I'll bind it with a bit o' my gownd!"

He laughed, and held up his other hand with the irons dangling from the wrist.

"Now will you give it to me?" he demanded. "You were kind, though, to offer it," he added, in a changed tone, "but I don't feel my hurt."

He took the lantern from her hand and stepped cautiously out upon the lodged fragments. On and on, picking his way carefully, leaping from point to point, crawling on hand and knees over jagged heaps, losing his foothold sometimes and sliding almost into certain destruction, but preserved through all, until he could distinguish the light in the mill, his guiding-star, growing nearer and nearer to him as he alternately lost and again caught it in his sight.

Then the steadfast line began to lead him away from it. He left its comparative safety and sprang from one to another of the floating masses. He could see the blacker proportions of the mill loom out of the darkness, and the light he had watched so eagerly was just ahead of him.

The water filling into the lower story of the mill, the two women had with difficulty ascended a broken old stairway to the second floor. But the flood followed stealthily. Tearing loose such boards as yielded to their strength, they lashed them, with the blankets cut in strips, into the form of a raft. On this floating platform they were raised, until it was even with the windows from which the sashes had fallen in decay. Then they saw the light gleaming over the space between them and the shore. It was still raining, but more gently now, and the wind was lulling to a calm.

Peters came gradually on, coolly calculating every move he made, until within a half-dozen rods of the mill. There the water ran more swiftly, driving the ice in another direction. He plunged into the current striking boldly for the guiding light.

He was covered from head to foot with bruises, received on the way. His hands were fearfully lacerated and so benumbed that he used them with difficulty, his clothes were torn, and bloody from his wounds, yet he struggled desperately on.

The women strained their eyes toward the object they knew to be a man striving to reach them. A moment more and he would be safely with them.

Then an undercurrent cast up a sharp-edged mass which crushed against him, and forced the mangled form close up to the refuge it had sought.

The women cried out with sharp horror. Then Adria clutched him as he was going down, and with their united strength they drew him upon the platform.

He was not dead, but senseless, and so crushed that life could not long remain. They did what they could for him, and waited helplessly for the death which they felt would take the three together.

Every minute held an age of torturing suspense. The water rose steadily, and the long night wore on.

At last came a loud huzza from below. The workmen had effected an outlet for the dammed-up element. They clambered back to the solid ground, and the torrent rushed madly through the breach, widening it with every second's space until the entire gorge was swept away.

Gray dawn was breaking in the east when kindly men penetrated to the mill, and the rescue of those within it.

Foremost was Kenneth, who clasped Adria to his heart with a joyful sob of thanksgiving. Reginald Templeton stood back, curving the fate which had saved her for his rival when she was lost to him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

LUKE PETERS lay at the Grange, dying.

Valeria had given orders for the removal of the sufferers to her home, as soon as they were rescued from their peril. Nelly and Adria suffered only temporary inconvenience from the exposure they had sustained. Perhaps their sympathy for the man who had so rashly forfeited his claim on life to reach them, prevented more serious consequences.

Adria felt herself amply rewarded for all her recent trials by her lover's presence, and the assurances he gave her that they should not part again.

Reginald had not been seen since the party succeeded in reaching the mill. Valeria grew nervously anxious. What would be the result of the strategy which had made her his wife?

A note was placed in her hand during the day. She grew sick at heart, and went away by herself ere she opened it:

"You have usurped my name, so wear it, and flaunt it to your heart's content. You'll get no further satisfaction from me. I don't blame you much for the part you played, now I know the girl would have died before she had bent to my will. I shall seek my Lethe where no familiar associations shall revive things past. "R. T."

The guard whose duty it was to keep Peters in charge, could not but perceive his helpless condition. The chief officer detailed two men to remain at the Grange, but otherwise he was left free of restraint.

He suffered excruciatingly for a few hours, and then his pain almost entirely left him. This, the physician said, was a symptom that mortification had already set upon the crushed body. He was very weak, but conscious.

At his desire, a magistrate was summoned, and he made a full confession of past crimes.

"I'd let them go to the death with me," he said, "but some I can tell may help her in getting back her rights."

Nearly as possible in his own words, but omitting details unconnected with this story, is the following narrative:

"The woman who calls herself Nelly Kent is truly Helen Ellesford," he began. "I wanted to marry her once, but she knew better than I. She was never meant for the like of me. But I didn't think so then, and when she refused to listen to my love, I swore to take revenge for her scorn of me. I hated Hugh Ellesford from the moment I first saw him, when he came to her rescue after I, in my mad folly, had insulted her in the street.

"I watched them both and saw the growing intimacy. I waited to strike her a blow through him which should leave her desolate on the brink of expected happiness. But they eluded even my vigilance. They married, and were gone so suddenly that I found myself foiled.

"I knew he was an American, so I sailed for this country, and for years I wandered throughout the United States, seeking some trace of them.

"I found it in their boy, then about four years old, whom they had sent with his nurse to the Virginia sea-coast. I knew the woman, Juana; and the boy from his resemblance to his mother.

"I stole the child, and afterward traced the woman back to the Grange. I was satisfied, for the time, with my meed of revenge, and left them to mourn together over the supposed death of their babe.

"I took the lad to a village in an Eastern State, representing myself as the father, and reduced by illness to such destitution that I could not properly provide for him.

"I was directed to a middle-aged, childless

couple, by name Hastings, who consented to adopt him as their own, provided I would make no future effort to reclaim him. I willingly acceded to their terms, only stipulating that they should let me hear of him at stated intervals. A few weeks later the woman died suddenly. The man removed to a manufacturing town in a neighboring State, but, true to our bargain, kept me informed regarding the boy. The latter was known by the name of his adopted father, and by most people was supposed to be his own child.

"In time, Hastings also died. But I still assured myself of the boy's continued residence in Crofton. It is he whom you know as Kenneth Hastings!"

Nelly Kent, or as we must now call her, Mrs. Ellesford, gave a sudden cry.

"My boy!"

Kenneth clasped her outstretched hand, and, laying his bronzed face against her cheek, whispered:

"Mother!"

The two, long separated, were united at last, and each heart recognized the mutual claim.

Peters continued:

"For a while I traveled about with a circus company, but tiring of that, I went to New York, and there allied myself with a class of gentlemanly knaves, whose profession embraced anything from cutting a man's throat down to picking his pocket.

"My skill as a gymnast made me a valuable acquisition to their number. We did not confine our operations to that city alone, but had branch organizations throughout the country. It afterward fell to my lot to go from place to place carrying tidings too important to be trusted to cipher dispatches.

"On one of these occasions I fell in with Alan Templeton. He hired me to do some trifling jobs for him that were of a nature gentlemen don't care to be connected with. I found afterward that with these he was merely sounding me and my trustworthiness.

"At last he intrusted me with the work he had been preparing for all the time.

"His wife had once been affianced to Hugh Ellesford, but Colonel Templeton's overtures won her, and she eloped with the latter. Notwithstanding this conclusive evidence of her preference, Templeton had always entertained a suspicion that the lady cared more for her lover than his (the colonel's) wife had any right to do.

"I was deputed to keep an espionage over the lady and her actions. She was at The Firs then, while her husband was absent during a great portion of the time. Well, I executed my task faithfully, never losing sight of her when without her door, and carefully noting all visitors.

"At the end of a fortnight I had discovered nothing which could be construed as impropriety in her actions. Then one morning she walked out beyond The Firs into the Ellesford grounds, and there encountered the master of the Grange. It appeared as a purely accidental meeting though they held a lengthened conversation which I was not near enough to overhear.

"Colonel Templeton came down from the city the same evening, and sought me at once for my report. He lost control over himself as I had never known him before to do, when he learned of that meeting. He rushed away, cautioning me to remain about the vicinity, as he might find work for me that night.

"A couple of hours later, he came out to me again. I don't know what happened in that time, but his face was hard and expressionless as a mask, only his eyes held a devilish light.

"She has gone to him," he said, and his voice was perfectly cool. "You must put that man out of the way. A thousand dollars in your pocket the moment the job is done!"

"He knew of my hatred for Ellesford, and had previously got from me the fact of his private marriage, and the secret of the boy's existence. He knew he could depend upon me. He quietly gave me the details of the plan he proposed following.

"We went together to the Grange, gaining ingress without trouble. Ellesford kept no servant except the woman Juana, so there was little fear of chance discovery. We had intended lying in wait until the dead of the night; but, while it was yet early, there was a sudden commotion in the house, and a woman rushed past our hiding-place.

"Almost involuntarily we followed her, but, even then, Colonel Templeton retained his composure and securely locked the doors communicating with the kitchen and adjoining apartments. The door of the parlor was wide open, and we saw Hugh Ellesford's wife confronting

her husband and the other woman, but she rushed, out never seeing us. Templeton's hand for an instant closed upon my arm like a vise.

"Now!" he said, and we sprang in upon them. Mrs. Templeton had fainted. Her husband hurled Ellesford back, and catching her up, hurried away.

"When I saw the man who had won Helen's love, I lost all sense except my bitter hate for him. He saw murder in my face, and put up his hands as if to defend himself, but he might as well have tried to resist fate itself. I had a keen-edged knife in my hand, but he fought fiercely, and I could not succeed in giving him a fatal wound. I threw the blade away, and springing at him suddenly, fastened my hands on his throat.

"He tried to speak. 'Helen, my wife—' he muttered. His words maddened me still more, and I choked the utterance in his throat. Even when I knew he was quite dead, I beat and stamped upon him.

"I never remembered how I got away from the place. When I came to myself, I had crawled back to The Firs, and Colonel Templeton had hidden me in an unused cellar. He kept me there until the immediate excitement died away, and then procured me a disguise, by means of which I succeeded in making my escape."

The confession was duly signed and witnessed, and he lay back completely exhausted.

Old Juana, who had been sent for, had crept into the room during the recital. She was now seen upon her knees, silent tears of thanksgiving rolling down her cheeks.

"The Blessed Virgin be praised," she cried, brokenly. Then calming herself, recited her version.

"After my mistress left me, that dreadful night, I was stupefied for a moment, dreading what might come. When I did attempt to follow her, I found the door locked against me. Then I heard sounds as of a violent struggle. I crouched down on the floor, fearing and praying.

"All became still for a time. I waited there, not daring to move. Horrible sights kept defining themselves before my eyes, against the blank darkness. I waited and prayed through all that terrible night, made worse by the awful silence in the house beyond.

"Daylight came, after what seemed ages of suspense. Then I stole out at the back entrance, through the garden walks to the front. The door was wide open, and there was blood on the steps. I grew sick and faint, but put down the weakness, and went steadily in.

"It proved as I feared. My master lay murdered, and in a pool of blood on the floor I found the locket which my mistress always wore. I secured it, and also the knife which lay at one side, lest it, too, might tell a tale. The locket I carefully cleaned, and put by in the secret drawer; the knife I buried where I knew it could not be found.

"Afterward I gave the alarm. I supposed that my mistress had committed the deed, rendered furious by the other woman's presence there; and assumed my part to ward off any suspicion which might betray her.

"When months passed, and I learned of her whereabouts—"

The physician at the bedside stopped the woman's story with a gesture. A change was coming over Luke Peters's face.

"I'd like to hear her say she forgives me," he muttered. "Where is she—Nelly!"

Mrs. Ellesford laid her trembling hand on his. "Ask one mightier than I to forgive, Pedro. I hold no anger against you—may God pardon you as freely."

He seemed satisfied; then some remembrance disturbed him.

"The papers," he muttered. "I looked for them in the drawer, but they were gone. You must find them to prove—to prove—"

His mind wandered for a moment, but reverted back to the subject.

"The certificates were not there," he repeated. "They are here, my man!"

Luke passed his fingers over them, then his hand fell helplessly away.

"I can't see," he murmured. Then he sunk gradually into unconsciousness, and passed quietly away.

Bitter tears were shed over the death-bed of that crime-laden man. But those whom he had injured most, rejoiced that Death had snatched his victim, rather than he should have perished through execution of the law.

Mrs. Ellesford and Kenneth assumed legal and undisputed possession at the Grange.

There was a quiet marriage ceremony, where Adria placed her hand in that of her heart's choice, and promised to "love, honor and obey," until death should part them.

CHAPTER XXV.

COLONEL TEMPLETON was lodged in a cell of the county jail, arrested for instigating and being accessory to the murder of the late Hugh Ellesford. Luke Peters's confession was in the hands of the law, and that powerful organ lost no time in enforcing its requirements.

He paced the floor with measured tread, his face passive, and lip scornfully curved, as of old. He was not one to shrink from even such danger as now encompassed him.

There were footsteps in the corridor, the iron door swung open, and the jailer ushered in Mrs. Templeton. She was scarcely more worn or depressed than she had been before.

She went to him, laying her hand timidly on his arm.

"Alan, my husband!"

"Well, Irene?"

He did not look at her, but stared steadfastly before him.

"Oh, Alan! Alan!" All her forced composure gave way, and she clung sobbingly to him. "Oh, my husband, you must believe me now—now that we part forever. Oh, Alan! I gave my very soul to you. It was cruel to ever doubt me."

He put out his hand, touching her face gently.

"I think I see more clearly now, Irene; but I crushed out my sentimentality long ago. Don't cry, and don't fear that I'll suffer the fate they're planning for me."

She grew quiet at once.

"I know," she said. "Look here, Alan!"

She drew from beneath her cloak a file and a tiny saw. He took them, concealing them about his own person.

"Thank you, Irene!"

They conversed quietly on temporal things until her time had expired. Then he clasped her in his arms a moment, and kissed her tenderly.

"You will be happier without me," he said.

All her heart's agony burst out in a hopeless cry.

"I shall die," she said, "and then I may find peace."

A few nights afterward there was a great cry raised in the little village. Colonel Templeton had broken jail. The forces rallied in pursuit, but he escaped them all. Tidings of him were never wafted back.

Notwithstanding Valeria's ungenerous conduct, and her complicity in Adria's abduction, the latter would still have interceded for her, and secured her a permanent home at the Grange. But Valeria steadily refused the unmerited kindness.

She went instead to Mrs. Templeton.

"I am Reginald's wife," she said. "I love him so that he can not but come back to me some day. Let me stay with you and care for you until then."

And Reginald's mother made her kindly welcome.

Mrs. Templeton failed rapidly from the moment she was assured of her husband's safety. Before the summer passed she sent a tremulous line to the widow of Hugh Ellesford:

"I am dying. Will you not come to me?"

"IRENE TEMPLETON."

She went at once. Only pity was in her heart, when she compared the fate of this sorrow-stricken woman with her own—completely happy, now.

"I sent for you," Mrs. Templeton said. "I wanted to assure you of your husband's loyal truth."

"I had been ill of a fever, and recovering but slowly, came to The Firs, believing country air would do me good. My husband"—she spoke as though deprecating anger against him—"had always been jealous of my former attachment, utterly without cause, for I gave him my whole heart when I married him.

"During one of my morning walks, as I began to grow stronger, I met Mr. Ellesford. I was looking wretchedly ill, and he spoke to me with kindly solicitude. I had ventured further than I should have done, and he, leading me to a seat, declared I must rest before attempting to return. Afterward, he gave me his arm back to my own gate.

"That night my husband burst in upon me in an insane rage. He accused me of faithlessness—untruth to him whom I loved better than my own life; taunted me with holding clandestine interviews with my former admirer.

"His bitter words drove me wild. First, I had clung to him, protesting my innocence; then, realizing fully the injustice he did me, I disdained to refute the charges he presented.

"My silence only aggravated him.

"Why don't you go to him openly?" he asked.

mockingly. 'I was so readily blinded, I wonder you have not faced me with him as your dearest friend.'

"The fever coursed through my veins again. I was not myself, or I would never have answered and acted so rashly."

"I will go to him," I said, "and he shall prove to you how wrongly you have accused me."

"I fled then, out through the gathering night, straight to the Grange. There my strength deserted me, and I sunk down, weak and trembling, on the threshold. Your husband found me there, and, taking me in his arms, as though I had been a child, carried me within."

"He rung for lights, and for wine, with which to revive me, but the woman bringing them misunderstood the situation. She spoke sullenly, and acted strangely. Much annoyed, Mr. Ellesford dismissed her from the room, and endeavored to soothe me, until I could tell him my errand."

"It was a hard task to reveal my husband's unjust suspicions; but he gathered my mission, and promised to accompany me back to The Grange, and add his testimony to my own, soon as I should be strong enough to return."

"While we waited, he told me of you, and of his happy life. 'I know you will keep my secret,' he said."

"Then you burst in upon us, and beyond you, through the open doorway, I saw my husband's face, with a vengeful look upon it which struck my heart cold and numb."

"I fainted then, and knew no more until I awoke in my own chamber, and heard them talk of the mysterious tragedy enacted at the Grange."

"A nobler heart never beat in man's bosom than the one you wronged by doubting it."

Helen Ellesford shed remorseful tears. But she was happier afterward than she could have been without the knowledge."

Mrs. Templeton lingered on through the warmer months, and went with the falling leaves."

The Firs had been secured to her, and at her death she bequeathed the place to Valeria."

And there the latter waits still—a lonely woman, hoping against hope, that the man who is her husband only in name may yet return to her."

The happy ones at the Grange do all they can to relieve her solitude, and she has expanded better qualities beneath the influence which could forgive and bury recollections of her own selfishness."

Let us hope she may at least become reconciled to her lot."

THE END.

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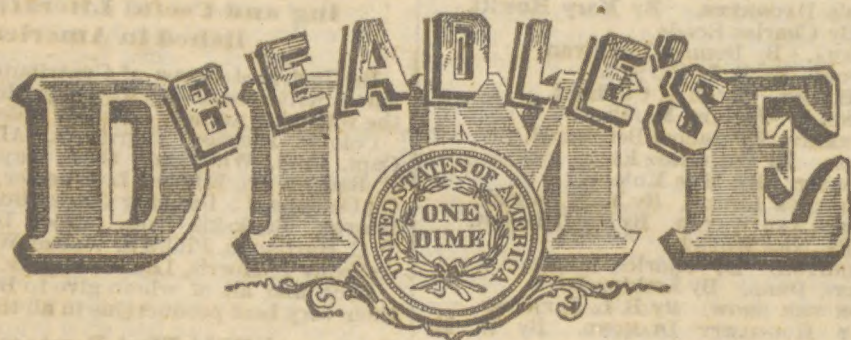
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